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The Desert Moon Mystery
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on a Western Ranch



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After Every Meal

October, 1927

Vol. LVII No. 4

Everybody's

OSCAR GRAEVE
Editor

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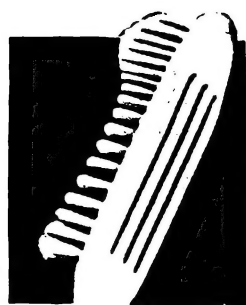
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ADVENTURE



Three Tales

from the Life of the Old West

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

I. THE BAG OF GOLD COINS

NOTE.—When these stories came in they seemed so real I couldn't decide whether they were fact or fiction. So I wrote Mr. Spears and asked him. You'll find his answer in the Meeting Place.

—*The Editor.*

ABNER YOUNG discovered deep-water trout in a small lake back in the Sharp-Edge mountains, east of Dulcet, where he lived. He had caught these relatives of the salmon in New York, netting the famed trout of the Great Lakes and after some futile attempts, he began to land them on young gophers, mice, and other tiny rodents for bait. Keeping his secret, he carried twice a week some five hundred to one thousand five hundred pounds of fish into the always hungry mine camps in the basin south from Great Salt Lake.

Those fish were about the most delicious the mineral developers had tasted in many a day. At first, they paid one dollar a pound, but Young was a Mormon. He was making so much money he felt obliged to ask himself whether it was right to take so much cash for his meat, and after the second or third trip he dropped the price to fifty cents a pound. And if he found some family which had run into such hard luck as a broken leg or a shut down mine, he would see to it that there was fish for Tuesday or Friday, anyhow.

Young knew such prosperity as he never before had enjoyed. He worked fifteen or twenty hours a day, fishing, dressing the catch, and hauling. From his little lake to his nearest market was eighteen miles over such a trail as would have astonished

most people east of the Mississippi. He would sell his fish to the day mine shifts coming off, to the women of the cabins, to ranchers and farmers and to the strollers going by in their covered wagons. He would sell to hotels, saloons, boarding houses, and no one objected if he roused them at midnight or later—complained if he let them sleep.

A stolid, silent, peaceable man, Young attracted almost no attention at all as he came and went. He drove a splendid team of horses, riding a light, strong wagon, and he showed no more fish to a customer than he had to, pound, two pound, ten or twelve pound fish according to the demand. The result was that no one realized he was taking away two hundred and fifty dollars to seven hundred dollars or so in cash, every trip to town. He did his fishing alone, for the secret of his bait was worth thousands of dollars to him—gave him the monopoly in his territory. And carefully he added to his lands, his cattle, and other possessions, wealthy though none suspected it.

The Utah mine camps were never as lively, as lawless, as those in the other districts. For one thing the basic farm population was kindly and liberal. The passersby who ran short of food could stop at practically every ranch in the country, and receive grazing for hungry animals, fruit, grain, meat for hungry humans, and shelter in times of stress and storm.

Often men would go broke playing the games or drinking. The young and reckless would perhaps look around for a chance to take on snack-grub. Many an outlaw, hungry and penniless, began his career of crime in a casual theft under the spur of cruel indifference to the needs of fellow men. But there was almost no excuse anywhere down the line from Great Salt Lake for taking food or outfit by violence. Even outlaws, riding light and fugitives for crimes in the Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada and Colorado camps would walk Spanish down the American Fork or out of the Green River country until they struck the wilds below St. Georges as at Las Vegas or beyond. The bad-men did not need to steal when all their necessities could be had for the mere hungry look on their countenances.

Accordingly, Abner Young on his long, lonely trips with fish never thought of the

possibility of bandits stopping him. Among the habitual criminals of the West of that day hardly any would come into Utah, except to pass through or scout down in the guise of honest folk, grazing their horses and sheltering themselves till in other regions the dust they had raised settled and was forgotten.

THEN one late afternoon as he came out with the largest load of fish he had ever caught, three horsemen with their handkerchiefs over their faces met him as he was traveling down a north-east wind which was loaded with yellow alkali dust. Young thought nothing of the handkerchiefs up over the nostrils and hats down over the brows of the three men. They rode strange horses, and wore boots, overalls, woolen shirts, gauntlets. Rifles and holster weapons meant something a bit unusual, though probably they were cowboys riding out hunting, or wild horse catchers or even a posse going after some one.

"Howdy!" a heavy voice greeted, and Young eased his horses to a stop. "Totin' in butter?"

"No—fish," Young replied.

"Fish—smoked?"

"Fresh."

"Sounds good!" one laughed, carelessly, riding over to the box and pulled the three ropes by which the tarpaulin over the wagon box was held down. The gale lifted the canvas with a noisy flap and there the rather impudent men stared at nearly a ton of trout which had been caught in a hundred foot depth of lake water, supplied by snow melted on the mountain crests.

One of the men reached and took a ten pound fish. The three rode on their way, laughing. Abner Young watched them go, saying nothing. He was unarmed. He was astonished. He was peaceable. Tying the tarp back over the wagon box, he drove on his way to Dulcet and at ten o'clock on the following morning, he had \$897.50 in gold and silver, his wagon was scrubbed and he had eaten a fine store breakfast.

When he left town he settled down to a long, weary ride. He had been on the go more than thirty-six hours. He was accustomed to enduring a terrific strain of wakefulness, business requiring strict attention and his relaxation was now hindered by the memory of those three riders

who had acted so different, borne themselves so impudently, and kept their faces covered, even while they made their remarks. He had given away scores of fish. If they were hungry, unable to pay, he would have given them a twenty pound fish, rather than see them suffer.

He tried to excuse them on the ground that they were young, that they were playing a joke, that they did not know it was against a man's conscience to see man or beast suffer from relievable privations. He couldn't help but remain uneasy and alert. Always in the previous trips, he had let himself doze, giving his horses free rein to travel. He had kind of a relay system of draft animals, leaving a team here and there along his fish-market route so that none of them need overdo—endure what he imposed on himself.

Ahead of him stretched fifteen miles of sage and gravel. On the left rose a mountain range, with deep cañons. On the right were miles of vast salt flats. Streams ran out of the heights to evaporate into the air, or sink into the ground, but waterholes and runlets of water gave good drinking all along here, with patches of junipers in scatterings on side mountains and sloping alluvial fans.

HIS wakeful vigilance was suddenly and strikingly rewarded. Just before he entered a half mile of scattering junipers he saw over toward the mountains three puffs of dust on an alkali bench. He looked back and compared that dust with his own wheels' disturbance. He looked westward to where he had met the three riders of the day before. Out of the interstices among the junipers he saw presently that three horsemen were coming at a course which would bring them into his two-rut desert trail on beyond the edge of the junipers in which he was now driving.

As his horses walked, the wagon wheels rattling and crunching along, Abner Young gave thought to all the various circumstances. The \$897.50 in his rawhide bag was hard earned. Ordinarily, he could carry it on the spring-seat beside him, giving the heavy coin no thought, whatever stranger he met. But those three reckless young men, with the handkerchiefs over their faces might not have had them there merely to protect their mouths and noses from the stinging dust or their necks from

the flying ants. They had stolen ten pounds of fish, five dollars. He would have gladly given them the fish, but they had preferred to take it without his leave.

He could at intervals see the three approaching. At something more than half a mile distant he recognized two of the horses, a striking sorrel and a grey-blue, so he knew these were the same three men. He took from the seat beside him the rawhide bag of gold and silver and when behind a tree-cluster, out of sight, he gave it a sideways fling off to the right, or westward, where it fell among some scattering low sage and dry wisps of herbs.

Thus he could with equanimity ride forth twenty minutes later to where the three waited for him, their silk handkerchiefs over their faces, though there was no alkali in the wind nor winged-ants flying. A glance showed the clean wagon box, with the tarpaulin folded up and two bags of supplies.

"Sold the fish, I reckon," one of the men remarked. "Low you got seven-eight hundred dollars. Fork over!"

"No," Abner Young shook his head, his tone deprecatory, "I have no money."

"Don't lie to us, Mormon!" another exclaimed, shrilly, his voice nervous.

"Here is what I have." Young spread his arms out, motioning around.

Two of the men dropped their reins in front of their horses and rushed over to the wagon. They felt down the shirt, trousers, and even knocked off the fisherman's wide hat. They emptied out the bags of groceries, and store supplies. They even looked under the wagon and shook open the big heavy canvas wagon tarp.

"Where's that bag of money?" one demanded threatening with his revolver. "Where's it? You sold the fish, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes! I sold them," Young admitted, adding, "In these days it takes a lot of money to keep going. Did you boys ever try to keep up payments on a mortgage? Did you ever pay interest on notes against your cows? If you had, I expect you wouldn't be asking a farmer like me where I've put my money. I know it's disappointing," he went on. "You kind-a passed this by—a half eagle, gold, two wheels and four bits."

He showed them the coins from his trousers pocket.

"I have that left from my load of fish," he sighed, sorrowfully.

The three glared at him.

"Huh!" one said, presently, his steely blue eyes almost twinkling. "It sho' is slim pickings for eagles—after buzzards is through with a carcass!"

With that they rode on their way, taking tobacco, coffee and some salt from among the supplies. Young continued on his journey, and three days later he came along that trail headed in the other direction, his wagon loaded with fish.

Back among the cedars he stopped, jumped down from the wagon and went looking for his rawhide bag. He didn't find it. After an hour he bethought himself of the fish, the sunshine—the need of haste to get them sold and eaten. He drove on.

He passed that place fifty times and still did not find the bag of gold and silver. He never found sign of any other passerby picking it up—he wondered if he had watched it plainly, if he had really remembered where he thought he threw it?

He circled and ranged but to no avail.

Three years later he came morosely past that \$897.50—the ghost of it in his memory. For the first time he did not go look for it. Glumly he decided it was gone. His glance turned westward. The sun was setting.

Two hundred yards beyond any point he had ever traversed, he saw an odd line of reflections, sparkles in the gravel under the cedars and throwing the sunshine ricocheting into his eyes. He wondered what they could be. He stopped his team, went over to see, and there he found the long lost coins strung along for a hundred feet or so.

A marmot, or woodchuck, perhaps a coyote, fox, badger—some animal had carried away the sweaty rawhide bag, worrying it, gnawing the puckering strings and then the coins had leaked out, falling in a line, and when Abner Young was through looking he had \$891.50, a silver dollar and a five dollar gold piece having been covered, probably by drifting sand which had polished and kept the coins bright.

II. A CLOCK FOR THE SADDLER

THE saddle-maker, leather-embosser, hostler-cutter of Dulcet was a little old man, Myron Crowfoot. Crowfoot was undersized, wizened-faced, blue-eyed, weighing perhaps 110 pounds and having hands of extraordinary skill and swiftness. He could do anything with leather, and always had a big vat of hides in his back yard where he was tanning just-so skins in chaparral bark mixtures. He had devised his own formulas, loosening the hair in native alkalis and those who wore his holsters declared they were a shade the fastest of all the gun scabbards on the market. And one of Crowfoot's saddles could be depended on to cling harmlessly to the back of any beast and to fit any man who forked one made for him.

A snarling, short-tempered, terrier of a man, Crowfoot took orders for his wares with a grimace of dislike and he acted as though he hated his customers. Many a proud and haughty mine owner or ranchman who knew the old man's bad manners preferred to go to Cheyenne, a thousand

miles, to have leather made up to order rather than go fifty or ten miles to Crowfoot whose insults were unbearable.

One day a stranger rode into Dulcet on a tall, narrow horse, a beauty to see the beast from the broadside, but he looked like a mirage distortion from front or rear; he was so thin across the chest and hips. The rider was tall, rather well proportioned and yet, somehow, matched the beast whose free gait betrayed endurance. The saddle the man rode was old and weathered, as though it had hung in sun and wind, night air and cloudbursts, on some abandoned ranch harness rail, out by the corral. The reins had been broken and slit-knot tied in several places, and the stirrup straps had been reinforced with pieces of lariat rawhide.

The newcomer saw the sign of Myron Crowfoot, Leatherer, jutting over the sidewalk. The letters were gold, the background glossy black, and bespoke the work of some excellent, probably itinerant, letterer. And Old Crowfoot wiped the dust off his sign with a swab on a stick, every

once in a while. Swinging down from the horse the stranger stepped into the little workroom, which had but one seat, which Crowfoot always occupied, if any one.

"Make me a saddle?" the pleasant voice of the visitor inquired.

"What's that?" the leather man asked.

"I want a saddle for my horse; will you build it for me?" the man repeated.

"Got any money to pay for it?"

"Yes."

"Want a good one?"

"About a hundred and fifty, or two hundred dollars."

"Blamed good saddle for a riding fool," Crowfoot snarled. "More worthless the cowboy the better his saddle—"

Very deliberately, but inescapably, the customer reached and lifted Myron Crowfoot by the scruff of the neck, dragging him squalling and twisting like a cat over the narrow counter and toward the door. In passing the visitor took from the wall a piece of tug three inches wide, half an inch thick and two feet long, specimen of wheel-team, ore-wagon, harness stitching. Outside, the rider stretched the leather worker over the large round tie rail, and with a quick flip dangled him feet and head together.

Deliberately, the rider took a turn with a quirt around the man's neck and ankles, making the old scold fast. Then stepping around where he would have a full arm swing with the leather tug, the man who had been insulted laid the flat of it with loud smacks on the rounded, easy mark which Crowfoot's position made inevitable.

"E-e-e-yeow!" a cowboy from Texas whooped, and from up and down the streets came running spectators who would not have missed the spectacle for anything but bad luck.

Having laid on ten strokes less one, a twitch of the quirt and a lift of the neck brought the saddler to his feet where he stood gasping for breath, holding both hands on those rounded portions where the strap had fallen with such careful, noisy blows.

"There's the horse I want the saddle for," the man said. "That rigging on him now fits me good. I came in a hundred miles just to have Myron Crowfoot build me a saddle. I 'low you're going to do it. I'll carry the old one in for you. Match your work with reins and I'll use

my old bit and rings. I'll put up at the Falling Stars while I'm waiting, and the horse'll be in the livery barn corral. He's a bit narrow, you notice, but I've had a special pad blanket sewed for that, rounding out the back. You'll put two hundred worth of work on it, and I'll supply the metals. How long before you'll get to my job?"

Crowfoot, his breath coming more regularly, twitched and wrinkled around his mouth.

"Tomorrow afternoon," he replied with a snap of his teeth.

A rotund, jovial man rather oversupplied with chins, started to snicker. At that the piece of tug somehow whimpered in the manner of good leather swinging through the air and with a tremendous pistol-crack turned up across the tightly drawn trousers of Barrel Newman. Newman went straight up on his tiptoes, stretching six inches taller than in many a day. His gasp sounded like the woof of a surprised grizzlie bear. He turned, a fat man gone angry in the shortest time on record.

"This is all my laugh," the rider said, quietly. "You'll mind your business, Crowfoot'll tend to his, and I'll look after what's mine—all of it. Reckon you understand me, Fatty?"

"I reckon," Newman grimaced, wallowing away, bluffed.

On the hotel register of the Falling Stars the stranger wrote his name, Wakeup Wilkins, Red Desert. He took the third room showed to him, one on the second floor at the corner, overlooking the Dulcet Mineral Bank diagonally opposite. He was rough, proud and hard, accepting the joke of his popularity as his due.

Crowfoot worked on the saddle as he had been told. No one had ever seen a more beautiful shaping up of leather, and on each side of the pommel he inlaid two of the most unusual and conspicuous of ornaments, a daisy on each side of the saddle with petals of pearl and center of bright gold.

The rider, who called himself Wakeup Wilkins of the Red Desert, remained a week longer than it took to thoroughly do the job of saddle-making, and then he paid Myron Crowfoot the money, threw down five ten dollar bills as a tip to show his ultimate satisfaction and rode away.

"HI-I!" the folks around Dulcet jeered the saddle-maker. "There's one man who knows how to unsnarl yer temper!"

Crowfoot made a grimace and went back to his last, making more harness and better saddles, but his manners somewhat amended. He now chortled and chuckled, as well as grumbled and snarled at his work. He would start to greet a customer with his habitual growls but suddenly a gleam of good nature would affect his mind, his eyes would lighten and he would actually grin all over his wizened face.

"What's the joke?" the city marshal demanded, and the mayor himself as well as the owner of the Never Quit Hope mine all came around to see the strangest phenomenon of all the land, Myron Crowfoot growing happier. President Wilkie of the Dulcet Mineral Bank came around to have a saddle made for him. Wilkie was a good, even-tempered and competent man, but he wouldn't take even the cantankerous, rather harmless Crowfoot's abuse. He was greeted with chuckles and mumbblings of delight. The saddle-maker even squawked a song as he worked on the banker's saddle, his humming the most amazing sound that ever afflicted a passerby, which is saying much of a mine camp where few of the sounds are usual to civilized ears.

In record time Wilkie's saddle was finished. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, dark, rich, embossed and yet having nowhere a single gleam. Wilkie had desired silver and gold, pearl and color. Stubbornly, the saddler persisted against the wishes of the customer, but when Wilkie saw the dignified beauty of that wonderful harness, so worthy of a mine-camp, cow-country, supply town financial leader, he too, added fifty dollars to the price. Crowfoot's eye for appropriateness was invincible.

The following afternoon, while Wilkie was out enjoying his purchase, riding Wolverine, his favorite horse, five men rode into Dulcet down the west alley, parked their horses headed west beside the bank and went inside. What they did there was plenty. When they emerged they had cleaned the cage and the vault and they romped away within ten minutes taking twenty-seven thousand dollars in cash and nearly thirty thousand dollars in negotiable securities. The fiduciary institution

knew then how its customers felt, coming in to get some spare change for their grub, stock, current expenses and such.

The desperadoes disappeared in the junipers. They scattered and covered their tracks in the mountains. The hastily organized posses of citizens, the slower but abler posses from the sheriff's office, the watchfulness awakened by numerous messages to headquarters of official bandit catchers all failed. The getaway was clean and back in a cañon the county sheriff found unmistakable evidence of the rascals' efficiency. They had paused there to put on cached clothes and to burn the clothes they had worn on the raid, and before destroying the overalls and shirts, they had removed the buttons, buckles and other metal marks for identification by detectives.

The Flaming Investigations, Inc., at last sent in Wiles Cobray, the service man on whom fiduciary institutions, corporations of transport, and dealers in priceless trinkets must ultimately depend for revenge even if restitution failed. President Wilkie accompanied Cobray around the town of Dulcet, introducing him as an Eastern capitalist. Somehow conversation drifted to the robbery, and Cobray listened, unsatisfied. There was not one clue anywhere. The scoundrels had even picked up range horses for the actual raid, having left their best mounts back in the mountains to begin to run where pursuit was growing weary.

"Howdy, Crowfoot," Wilkie greeted the saddler. "I want you to meet Wiles Cobray, from Wall Street. He's here to invest some money—"

"Yeh!" Crowfoot grinned, grimacing like a cat, "invest your money to find them hold ups. I know him—Cobray! Well, he's a good man, sure."

"Can't you help us, then?" Cobray asked quickly. "You've had your eyes open."

"You get out Wilkie!" Crowfoot snapped at the banker. "Too small for but one customer at a time—G'wan!"

The banker colored, hesitated and left without a word. An hour later Cobray went to the bank, saying to Wilkie:

"All set, old man! Let you know anything I hear—that springs right."

Fifteen minutes later the dust of Cobray was settling north of town. Three

weeks had gone by since the raid. No sign of the robbers had been found, apparently. The Dulcet Mineral Bank was sweating along on borrowed money and the board of directors' own personal funds. Nearly sixty thousand dollars had gone away. The chances seemed that it would never again be found among the bank's resources. The scoundrels who live on the industry of others, taking the wages that others earn, were probably already at Memphis, St. Louis, N'Orleans, Los Angeles, Chicago or on Manhattan spending like fools to be rid of the coin before their inevitable capture. To the victims there is small satisfaction that crooks are overcome at last. Jail sentences do not make up for heart-ache money.

The monthly meeting of the Dulcet Mineral's board of directors sat down. They had had numerous special, emergency meetings. Now they took up the unfinished business. They were glum enough! In red ink their deficit stared them in the face. The world never knows the sacrifice of crime's silent, burden-carrying victims—the way the square-dealers take on the deadly weight of misfortune to keep misfortune from spreading.

A messenger dashed up to the bank and rapped impatiently on the board room door.

"G'way!" Wilkie roared angrily at the disturbance.

"'Portant message!" the boy shouted.

Wilkie hesitated. With blood-shot eyes he stared at the door. What message could be important but one? He opened to the boy himself, and tore open the black-print yellow envelope. One glance and he leaned back against the wall, as he read in a hoarse whisper:

WILKIE—
DULCET,
CAPTURED SIX BANDITS AND RECOVERED FIFTY-ONE THOUSAND LOOT THANKS TO CROWFOOT. COBRAY.

"Thanks to Crowfoot!" Wilkie exclaimed. "Bring that scoundrel here—make him come! But there were only five bandits in the raid, boys!"

Sputtering, cursing, grimacing, the city marshal and a deputy sheriff had difficulty dragging the saddler from his job. But they stood him, shrunken, shriveled, snarling before the board.

Wilkie read him the message, demanding an explanation. A grin flashed across the wrinkled face.

"The feller who spank hell out of me!" Crowfoot cackled. "I fix him—"

"But how?"

"The saddle I make—two bright, big daisies on the pommel! Bulls eyes for detectives to hunt for—bah! Wakeup Wilkins! He was the bandit lookout—I spotted him! Didn't I? Sure I did—and when Cobray came I told him. Every sheriff, every city marshal, every detective—they all look for my pearl-petals, golden eye daisies—where I put them! Five bandits make the raid—but one, he come first and plan it all. Bah!"

Wriggling away, Crowfoot returned to his last.

"He gets the reward," Wilkie said. "To boot, one of you offer a resolution to buy him a clock—the best blamed chronometer to be had—to hang on his wall."

"Why a clock?" the leading mine owner inquired.

"To tell interrupters when it's time to get out of the way so he can do his work!" Wilkie replied. "Carried!"

III. TEARS ON A COWBOY'S GRAVE

HAROLD WALLACK had been in Dulcet five days. He had spent all but two dollars of five months wages. He awakened in an abandoned shack just out from town. His mouth tasted like the mouldering ruins of a dead horse, while in his ears echoed the music of the Falling Stars Dance Hall, where he had spent his earnings and added to his memories.

He could see that night had fallen. The stars were like gems in the sky, of all colors, but flickering and quivering as though he were looking through alkali tears. He felt of his holster. No one had stolen his old reliable six-gun. He felt of his face, and no one had stolen his itching whiskers. His belt was nearly empty of loaded shells, so he confirmed his impression of much shooting in an effort to ring

the bell behind the local gallery's bull-eyes. His stomach was crawling like a ball of snakes, all unhappy.

He stumbled forth, where the stinging night wind stabbed his skin even through his stiffened, dried out clothes which wore and chafed him like rawhide. His feet were like boils and carbuncles. When he found a silver dollar in one pocket and two four-bit pieces in another he sighed as he headed with long strides back to the Falling Stars, intending to try his luck with one dollar and assuage his miserable thirst with the other.

But as he passed another shack on the way in, he heard a sob. He would have bet any one in the world there was nothing that could stop his dash to a bar. But he halted. A woman was weeping. His mind cleared as his resolution changed.

"Excuse me!" he addressed the door of the washed-down 'dobe wall. "Do I hear a lady crying?"

The door instantly opened. The light from a yellow fire in a small hearth revealed a dark, dull interior. A girl in the tinsels of a dance hall stood against the glow that cast so many shadows.

"Yes!" a harsh little voice hissed. "I'm crying—What's it to you?"

"Tain't right to have a woman weep!" he replied, simply. "I'm a cowboy, broke and no good. Same time if I could make you happy I'd do anything."

"Laugh!" she repeated, "Laugh! I've laughed till my throat cracked, I've sung till I wanted to die—but I haven't been happy! Cowboy, you couldn't make me happy. I'd never be happy again, but if I could go back home—as long as I live I'd be grateful to you! And I could kill Lanky Dan Faley."

Wallack sat on the chair before the fireplace. She sat on the disordered bunk opposite. He stared at her. She was passing twenty-five. Her eyes were staring at him, puzzled. In nearly five years she had not seen that particular expression in any man's eyes—quite the reverse, in fact. She saw a real wish to help, pity, understanding and regret. Her feminine intuition realized that Harold Wallack was a good sort, kindly, friendly and yet utterly no account.

"Here's two dollars," he said, reaching the three silver coins to her. "It's all I have. You're welcome. 'F I'd a known when I rode in las' Saturday, I could of

fired you up for that trip back home. Why didn't you tell me, that first dance we had?"

"You'd given me the roll you had?" she asked, and then nodded. "Yes, I know you would have, Cowboy! I almost asked you for it. You'd been better off—an I'd been back home in Nebraska. I'd been waitin' on the table in the old Rich Pasture Lunch. Two dollars ain't enough. Nev' mind, Cowboy! Thanks, though! I feel better—I don't want to cry any more."

"Two dollars ain't enough?" Wallack scowled. "How much would be enough, then? You waited on table in the Rich Pasture Lunch—huh! I know that place. But I'm from Iowa, myse'f. I went to Ames—had trouble—no good, you know! Stuck on myself. Got stuck in that college! Now I'm a poor cowboy, can't ride—much! Can't rope, either! Can't dig a posthole, even, with the sides clean to set the cedars true an' string the wires straight. Just a shiftless, worthless, miserable cowboy. 'F I was any good I'd have carfare back East for you. All I got's this two dollars."

He slumped dejected where he sat. His uselessness had dawned on him.

"I was a Smart Alec!" he went on, musingly. "Stuck on myself. Used to go over to the tourist camp ground, laughing at the travelers. Flirted 'round nights, too, ice cream parlors an' so on. Smarted with the gay ones. Come trouble—I run away from it. Always was a ducker. Now I could set you back on your feet, 'f I had a roll. You're a good sort, Sparkling Dora, an' now 'f you had the price you'd turn square, go back—wouldn't you?"

"Yes—I know I should!"

"All right, Dora! I—well, I've a friend. I'm going to borrow the price. When I go out, you let the bar fall tight. Don't let anybody come in. When I come back you be ready to go. You will, won't you? Can you ride?"

"Oh, yes—I worked a while at the Lazy Diamond outfit," she nodded. "I rode rodeo one summer."

He walked out into the night. He heard the bar drop behind the door. She had taken him at his word—that he had a friend in Dulcet who would let him have money, would loan him a couple hundred or so.

"A friend!" he snarled under his breath.

"Anybody here let me have two hundred—two bits!"

HE WENT around to the stable. He had paid the keep of his horse for a week in advance. He now brought his horse away and left it staked out behind the 'dobe shack. Then he circled back and looking along the hitching racks, he selected one of the best saddle animals and led it into the alley just behind the Falling Stars Dance Hall. His other preparations consisted wholly of lifting his dirty red silk handkerchief from around his neck up over his nose—a pure formality.

Three minutes later he had the populace of the Falling Stars amusement resort lined up against the wall, their hands above their heads. The proprietor, Lanky Dan Faley, was the exception. He had tried to forestall the bandit and now lay face down on the floor, quivering and shot through the neck, his spine severed. The robber meant business, and Lanky Dan had no relatives, no friends or associates in social or business life. With him dead, there was no incentive to butt in on the proceedings.

Two of the girls, carrying bags, swiftly obeyed orders and emptied tills, racks, pockets of all kinds of money, silver, paper and gold. Then they emptied the loot into one bag and rested it on the table in front of the shabby looking hold-up. He suddenly drove two bullets into the electric switch board across the hall and every light vanished. In the blackness there were squeals and cries—the scuffle of swift feet. The next instant the beat of horse hoofs heading southward rang in the alley.

Harold Wallack dropped off the horse back of the shack. He had circled swiftly around the town. Imperturbably, breathing normally—he knew he must preserve his calm under that young woman's sharp, wise gaze.

"I've come back," he called through the door. "I found my friend. He did better by me than I hoped."

He was admitted. Sparkling Dora stared at the roll of currency—paper money. It was a real wad. She had only half-believed the promise of the whimsical, serious talking cowboy. At the same time she had changed into plain clothes, a good riding suit. She had bundled into saddle bags her things which she would carry away. These were few, for she wanted no re-

mindings of her life in Dulcet if it was true she now could leave.

"Come on!" he said. "No! Now—you're through here, you know. No—well, tha's all right!"

She had thrown her arms around his neck, kissing him. But he carried her out of the shack in his arms and raised her light figure into the saddle of his own horse.

"Now ride," he ordered. "Take that west road, there through the junipers to the Union and Cheyenne Central Railroad! Go back home—and stay there!"

"Oh, Wallack! Come with me—for life!"

"Shucks!" He released her grasp. "G'wan! I'm no good!"

She rode away. She saw him riding back down town. As she paused up on the bench among the junipers to look back with mingled emotions, hating Dulcet and yet her farewell unbelievable in its generosity and chivalry, she heard firing, and over on the southside she saw the flash of firearms.

"Shooting 'er up!" she thought to herself. "Cowboys—aren't they the darndest—well, I'm through!"

With that she headed the horse she bestrode on the long ride over the road to the cars. The nag was just an ordinary ranch pony and the harness was a cheap stock saddle—perhaps forty dollars worth of horse and fixings. When she reached the railroad town she met one of the old Lazy Diamond boys. He would see that the beast was delivered back to the ranch where it belonged.

An hour later she was sitting in a sleeper going home to Nebraska. If things hadn't changed, if a big boom hadn't broken loose in the old town, she could buy the Rich Pasture Lunch, refit the place and put it into first class condition—serve real eats and make good, honest money! And as she watched the landscape swiftly passing by, deserts, mountains, prairies, bad lands, her thoughts dwelt on the uncouth, red-eyed, dissipated cowboy who had mortgaged himself for life just to give a dance hall girl a chance to come back.

"Oh," she whispered to herself, "when I'm back I'll find him!"

She found the old Rich Pasture Lunch in the dumps. It had gone wrong, gone broke, and there it was, a ruin of opportunity. She bought it from the old man-

agement which gladly took a third of its value. In ten days she reopened it under the name of "The Gratitude."

In a month she was making money and in six months she had a stake. She took the train back to the mine country and the arid range. She headed for the old Lazy Diamond where she had worked, where Harold Wallack had found his lowest level. As she swung down from the stage a yell greeted her. She flinched at the cowboy cry, "E-e-e-Yeo-o-ow!"

"Howdy, Sparkling Dora!" the outfit cried.

"Fine, boys!" She glanced at them, tears in her eyes, for to all of them she was and would always be the dance hall girl.

"Please, boys!" she begged. "I've turned square!"

They all blinked, stopped short, swallowed violently and to a man apologized.

"That's all right—you wouldn't know!" she smiled through her tears. "Where's Wallack—Wandering Harold—you know?"

"Wallack?" the rancher exclaimed. "Why, didn't you hear tell? He went bad. He held up the Falling Stars, killed Lanky Dan Faley and headed down across the Dry Basin. That was awful foolish, too. He couldn't have gone worse. They picked

his track up in the morning, and got him away down in the Happy Vision range. He'd had a chance if he'd gone the other way, into the junipers and over toward the railroad. As it was they killed him at that old lost camp, Sour Wells."

"They killed Harold!" she bit her lip. "He held up the Falling Stars! And they killed him—"

"He had about forty pounds of silver and gold on him. Everybody got his money back but Lanky Dan Faley. He was killed up. They're buried now together, down at Dulcet."

"I see, uh-huh!" she nodded. "I didn't know about it— I kind-a wanted to find Harold. You see, he sort-a helped me to come back—go straight."

She burst into tears. The outfit stood awkwardly around, and when she asked them to carry her into Dulcet they complied with alacrity. She wept some more on the Boot Hill graves. She had a stone put up to mark them. She had worked for Lanky Dan—apparently she had loved Harold Wallack. Then she went back to Nebraska.

"I bet they feel better!" somebody said. "I know I would, a woman shedding tears on my grave!"





The Loyal **GRENADIER**

A Chapter from the History of the Great War

By **ARED WHITE**

FIVE men sat grouped tensely around a massive, carved reading table of Circassian walnut in the elegant salon of a somberly magnificent white château in the environs of Meaux. Four of them smoked incessantly and regaled themselves from time to time with a sip of cognac of rare label. The fifth man, who sat slightly apart, watched them with greedy eyes each time they raised their glasses, but without being invited to share in their hospitality.

The whole setting suggested a game of chance of some sort, since it was long after midnight and there was no spirit of conviviality in the air; and the weary, strained faces of the players hinted at a contest that was long drawn out, and perhaps for high stakes. But there was nothing in their manner or words that told of the titanic struggle in which they were really engaged—a staggering game of wits in which the world itself was the stakes.

"My tongue would not be offended at a glass of your cognac, since there is nothing better to be had," the fifth man at the table said lightly, as the others raised their glasses again. He had said this same thing

several times before during the night, always adding depreciatingly: "Of course, the best of your French vintage is not to be compared with the worst of our Rhineland product."

One of the four men sneered. "It would be a sacrilege to let such beverage pass your lips," he said caustically. "Much like giving the nectar of the gods to the devil."

Three o'clock in the morning chimed melodiously in the village beyond. This game had been dragging on now for twenty hours. The four men who smoked and sipped cognac to quicken their wits were not the same ones that had started in the beginning of this contest with the lone fifth man. They were the last of three relays of fresh players who had come to the table in those wracking twenty hours. They wore, as did those who had preceded them, the uniforms and insignia of the French army intelligence service. At times when the fifth man nodded in weariness, one of them shook him to keep him wide awake. The fifth man wore the dull fog-green of the Prussian grenadiers.

Locked in the Prussian officer's brain

was the priceless military secret for which they played. It was a secret that controlled the destiny of races. If the German kept his secret in detail and let no unwise word escape his lips, this very château, by reason of its proximity to Paris, might become the headquarters of a German corps or field army within a fortnight. That would mean the doom of Paris—the Prussian objective in this last gigantic and frenzied push which had brought them through the Allied defences on up to the Valley of the Marne itself. And with Paris in the mad Kaiser's hands, who could say what was in store for the world!

If the four could wrest a part of his secret away from him, or trick him out of fragments of information that could be pieced together into even a vague outline of the German military plan, it might show the certain way to forestall the impending Teuton avalanche, and save the map of the world from vandal hands. In this vital hour, while the game went quietly on in the white château, the Prussian hordes were halted just beyond the gateway of the Marne, a brief ride distant, gathering their force for some tremendous blow while the world held its breath and tried in vain to penetrate the ominous veil of mystery that cloaked the Frankenstein.

Through those twenty grilling hours, since his capture on staff reconnaissance on the Allied bank of the River Marne, Lieutenant von Fessler had matched his wits against the flower of the French military intelligence service fearlessly, and with a noisy belief in his own proud superiority as a Prussian. He disdained the refuge of discreet silence. At times he became almost garrulous, meeting their combined attacks noisily, railing and jeering at them each time they laid some deft trap for him.

But not one word of useful information did he let escape his lips. From far and near the most experienced of the French operators had been drawn in for a part in this military third degree. Officers who were expert in forcing unwilling tongues—in patching little fragments and scraps of seemingly harmless information into a coherent and important disclosure. Lieutenant von Fessler only continued to laugh at their best laid plans to trick him into a betrayal of his priceless secrets.

The four men faced failure—failure as complete as that of those who had pre-

ceded them in the inquisition. Three o'clock found them at the end of their resources with only another futile hour in which to work. At four o'clock they must report the results of their operations. At that hour, if they had accomplished nothing, they were to be relieved.

Colonel de Foret, their chief, who waited their report in the great reception room across the château that served as military headquarters, had hinted that some other plan must be found if the intelligence service failed. This Prussian was not to be left in triumph so long as there was a human possibility of tapping the recesses of his brain and dragging forth information that might save the civilized world. An officer of the German Army staff, who must know all, was not to be interviewed every day.

France had paid a rare price for him—four human lives. A French lieutenant of infantry and three of his poilus of the patrol which had taken the Prussian. The French patrol might have killed Lieutenant von Fessler and spared those lives. But they had rushed the German's blazing Luger without sending a shot in return, taking the red loss of half their number in order that they might come to the grapple and carry him back alive with his black secret. The line had done its work well. The staff must not fail!

LEUTNANT VON FESSLER laughed contemptuously as one of the four shook him again when he nodded. "Ha, you think to break me down by fatigue," he cried. "You forget that Prussian blood flows in my veins. We are true to the Fatherland even in death."

He roused himself under the stimulus of this proud thought, and stood up to raise an imaginary glass above his head, inviting the four to join him with their real cognac.

"The day approaches," he boasted. "*Der Tag!* You cannot escape destiny—no, not even if I tell you all I know. So come, drink—*Deutschland über alles!*"

The French officers flushed angrily but held their tempers in check. The stakes in this game were too high for empty resentment. Besides it had come to them vaguely in the long hours of this struggle that their one hope of gaining useful information lay in the eternal noisy boast-

ing of this arrogant Junker with his distorted ego. Captain Revere, the senior of them, renewed the attack adroitly.

"Never will you get any farther this year—our armies have you blocked on the Marne," the French officer baited him.

"This year we shall prevail—I wager my life upon it," Lieutenant von Fessler boasted.

"Perhaps in your insufferable braggadocio you would like us to believe you will be in Paris before this month of July is ended," the captain persisted.

"This month, *ja!*" affirmed the Teuton. "Again I wager my life upon it, my life against a French centime—and I will be my own executioner before your very eyes if I lose the wager."

"Your Prussian Frankenstein shall be crushed before this new week is half over—what wager have you for that!" snapped the Frenchman hotly.

Lieutenant von Fessler sat down and gave a short, mocking laugh. "You cannot get your troubled minds off your business," he accused the other. "Well do you know that you cannot attack—you must act defensively. So it is information you want. Next you will want me to wager on the hour of our attack. Such stupid tricks you lay for me."

He stretched himself and yawned. "Not one useful word shall you learn from me," he shouted. "I know much—I tell nothing. No—you waste your time. You learn nothing—not even if you could revive the ancient pleasantry of stringing me up by the thumbs and burning out my eyes with a white iron. I am Prussian. We are destined to rule over—"

The bells chimed four o'clock of the new day. Four o'clock and failure. The four French officers arose to go. Lieutenant von Fessler had become defiant. They were no nearer to success than when they commenced with him at midnight. They filed out of the room silently, heavy of heart, and reported to the headquarters in the great reception hall across the château. The room was filled with French officers of the intelligence service who arose with tense expectation to hear their report. Colonel de Foret came forward eagerly.

"What have you learned?" he demanded.

"We have learned nothing, my Colonel," reported Captain Revere dejectedly. "I fear we have only fired his stubborn pride in outwitting us."

The colonel's face fell. He glanced at his watch and began pacing the floor.

Captain Revere broke forth in sudden passion. "The insulting *boche* defied us to string him up by the fingers," he exclaimed. "I am for taking him at his word. Our situation is desperate and it would be no worse thing than those Junkers would do if—"

"You forget yourself, Captain," Colonel de Foret rebuked the young officer. "I fear you are overwrought to think of such a thing."

"But if it will make him talk—anything is justified in this—"

Colonel de Foret turned upon the Captain testily. "It would not make the fellow talk," he said sharply. "I am surprised that you show so small a knowledge of men. That kind would only howl defiance at you with his dying breath—even were it not unthinkable to put him to the test."

"Then we are without hope—without hope, and the secret that will save France right here within our grasp," moaned Captain Revere.

The colonel glanced significantly at his wrist watch again and resumed a nervous pacing of the room.

"There remains a hope," he announced solemnly. "I have sent to Paris for the elder Le Ourq. He should arrive here at the château by automobile at almost any minute."

II

LE OURQ! The name had a strangely stimulating effect upon the weary group of officers in the room. Several of them started sharply at mention of the name. It came to their minds instantly why the acute Colonel de Foret had sent for M. Le Ourq. The greatest psychiatrist in all Europe. Few there were in France who did not know of the uncanny feats of this great brain specialist before the war in searching the unwilling minds of infamous criminals and drawing from them bits of information that, pieced together, led to their later downfall and confession.

However Le Ourq was not a soldier. Not even in his youth had he served with the levies, and so he knew nothing of the art of war. There was the report about that he had performed invaluable service to his country—for which he wore the cross

of the Legion d'Honneur, pinned upon his breast by Joffre himself after the first Marne. But what possible service could he have performed? Even the officers of the intelligence service often wondered at this and found themselves baffled.

But it was not so much the question of what he might be able to do with their unwilling Teuton guest that gripped the emotion of the officers when they heard Le Ourq was coming. They were struck by the monstrous whim of war that brought him here now to interview this man, the hideous impropriety of it, even though his coming be a matter of life and death. The young officer who was killed at the head of his patrol in capturing the German officer was a Le Ourq—the only son of M. Le Ourq himself.

Captain Revere, who a moment before had been advocating a return to the practices of medieval inquisition, raised his hands in horror.

"But it is impossible, is it not, that Monsieur Le Ourq can command his senses while facing this Prussian who only yesterday cruelly shot down his beloved son!" he protested.

"It is for France," said Colonel de Foret, grimly.

"His impulse will be to strangle the wretch," broke in a gray haired commandant passionately. "I fear, as one who has suffered the loss of five sons in battle, that you ask much of M. Le Ourq at a time when his tragedy so freshly weighs upon his mind."

"In this hour duty must come above all things," the colonel averred.

"But, my Colonel," persisted the grizzled commandant, "do you not forget that M. Le Ourq is not a soldier and has not a soldier's discipline? Does it not follow, also, that he lacks the military knowledge to get from this prisoner the information we seek, even though he succeeded in getting the wretch to talk where we failed? In forcing Monsieur to this trying ordeal, are we not wasting our own precious time on a very slender chance?"

Colonel de Foret's face set. "I do not overstate when I say it was Monsieur, more than any one other man, who stopped the first German armies on the Marne," he exclaimed earnestly. "Tonight he has an even greater duty before him. He will rise above himself!"

THE officers stood gaping at their chief, amazement, incredulity in every face. "It was Joffre who commanded on the Marne," they reminded him, almost in protest.

"Joffre, yes," said Colonel de Foret. "But who a greater counsellor than Monsieur le docteur! I will tell you—though it must remain a sworn secret within our own group—that it was Le Ourq who counselled that audacious counter attack that stopped the Germans when they first came towards Paris.

"No, he is not a strategist," the colonel went on with mounting fervor. "He is not a soldier. He knows nothing of war. But he knows men—knows their minds—and it is minds that direct wars—that wage wars. Guns and the masses of men who carry guns are only the pawns.

"It was Monsieur's mission to read the faces of the great German commanders and disclose to our generals the weaknesses of the leaders who were their foemen," the colonel went on. "Is not the will of the commander the will of his army? Are not his weaknesses their weaknesses—his mistakes their mistakes? When the commander falls into a black panic at the threat of his precious reputation—what is there left for his men but to follow his orders and abandon the lands they have paid for with their blood?"

The colonel lighted a cigarette and blew a ring of smoke at the walls explosively.

"Never shall I forget those words of Monsieur le docteur!" he exclaimed. "In those black hours when Wilhelm's armies were rushing down upon Paris—just as they are preparing to do again this very month—what miracle could stop them? Had they not snapped our best regiments like so many twigs?"

"They fatten only upon success," Monsieur told us. Ah, but there is great depth to those words. For days Monsieur had been sitting at headquarters doing nothing more but stare at photographs of the Kaiser's generals. I thought, at the moment, his theory that of an empty dreamer who knew nothing of war when he first spoke his conclusions. Arrogant pride was their common weakness, he said to us. The weakness of all of them—those Junkers. It was all that their brains were warped by the toxin of arrogance and mad ambition—an insane belief in their own destiny

as supermen. They were drunk with power and the lust of more power—and only the wine of success and adulation could keep them moving ahead in their distorted dream of claiming the whole world.

"He gave us the antidote. Reverses would sober them. Let the grim specter of defeat but leer around the corner at them and it would teach them caution. They were weaklings at heart—unwilling to risk their proud dream of empire too far. It was because they would not take chances too great with their own precious reputations—not a single one of them. Only in the red hours of success, of unfailing victory, were they terrible and to be feared. Then they would rush wildly on, with no thought of murderous losses in their fighting ranks, striving at all costs—short of the risk of personal reputation—for some dazzling new goal such as Amiens or Paris.

"Have not Monsieur's words been proven fully!" Colonel de Foret demanded. "When Marshal Joffre threw in the full weight of our last precious reserves and checked those Junkers for the moment, did they not weaken before this amazing military impertinence of our intrepid leader? Did they not turn their backs again to the west the instant their Junker brains were not inflamed by the wine of mad success—turn back to wait for a better day—a heaven-sent day of destiny? Who will question the fall of Paris had the armies of our enemies been firmly led by men of strong purpose instead of by those Junker madmen whose every thought and act was shaped by insolent pride and disordered ambition!"

Colonel de Foret's voice suddenly lowered without losing its vibrant intensity. "And the great Le Ourq since then has ferreted deep into the minds of our enemies and he has found a whole nation under the poisonous spell of that Junker malady. *Mon Dieu*—a whole people mad with an obsession of grandeur—with a disordered ego that is swollen like the liver of a silly goose fattened on corn at the stake by those who make *paté de foie gras*. More—Monsieur has found the certain cure—the return of reason. He has found why our enemies can never succeed, and that knowledge will save France—for he has shown us—"

THE distant whir of motors caught the colonel's ear and he broke off abruptly to jerk his wrist watch before his eye. The others, hanging breathlessly on his every word, did not catch the sound until the approach of an automobile to the château became unmistakable.

"It must be the car that brings Monsieur Le Ourq from Paris," exclaimed the colonel, controlling his excitement with an effort. "If so, he has come swiftly, well knowing the desperation of the hour."

A moment later there entered the room a large man in civilian attire, the ribbon of the Legion d'Honneur at the lapel of his coat. M. Le Ourq, no matter what his other achievements in medicine, had not mastered the secret of keeping down his own gross weight. He might have been a hundred pounds overweight for his height of six feet—a mountain of a man whose avoirdupois and waddling gait must have made him an absurd figure in uniform.

But Monsieur's head and face at once drew attention away from his stuffy figure. His head was large and unusually broad and high at the forehead. His face was impressive by reason of the dignity and repose of his well formed features and the steady, unemotional quality of his large, extraordinary gray eyes.

If the group of officers had expected to see a man broken by the ravages of grief, they were able to discern no outward evidence of stress in Monsieur's face and manner. His eyes—distended, protruding eyes which no man ever forgot—gave no hint of what was going on behind them unless it were complete serenity. They were calm, cold, professional eyes, without being repellent; the eyes of a remarkably balanced mind that held emotions and feelings in complete subjugation when there was work to be done.

"I am here at your request, my Colonel," Monsieur Le Ourq addressed the senior officer simply, bowing slightly to the group of officers who had snapped involuntarily to the military salute the moment he appeared before them.

"You have arrived in good time—although I am unhappy that I did not send for you sooner," replied Colonel de Foret. "A matter of the very gravest importance has arisen—one in which you alone can be of service."

M. Le Ourq laid aside his hat with a ponderous deliberation that relieved the high tension in the room. He inquired calmly if the officers would not be seated.

"It will give me profound satisfaction if I can be of the slightest service," he told the colonel when he had seated himself. "What is it you would have me do?"

"You must learn for us the day and hour of the impending German drive upon Paris—the form of the attack—such other details as you can give us," Colonel de Foret exclaimed. "With that information, our armies can break them again with certainty and start them back towards the Rhine."

"But just how am I to perform this remarkable feat?" M. Le Ourq inquired soberly. "I have my limitations—and know nothing of military intelligence operations."

"The information is all here in this very château," said Colonel de Foret. "It is locked in the brain of a stubborn officer of the Prussian grenadiers whom we hold prisoner."

M. Le Ourq started imperceptibly. "It is the fellow who—?" he began, without emotion.

"The same one," broke in Colonel de Foret, suddenly ill at ease. "Monsieur, permit me to tender to you our deepest sympathy in your great loss. It was with the greatest reluctance we brought you here to face this wretch who shot down your brave son. But for twenty hours have we grilled him without learning anything of what we must know. We had no alternative than to send for you."

No flicker of feeling showed in Monsieur's immobile face. He remained silent for some moments. "It is a time when we must think only of our duty to France," he said finally, in the collected voice of one who expounds a mere axiom.

"Monsieur is no less gallant than his noble son," Colonel de Foret exclaimed. "After all, it was your son's sacrifice that gave us this prisoner, and if now you, Monsieur, can give us his secrets—will it be too much to say that the name of Le Ourq has saved France?"

"Please to lay before me such facts as you possess," responded M. Le Ourq, abruptly.

The colonel sketched in first the military situation, then the results obtained from questioning of the Prussian officer, conclud-

ing with a simple outline of the information needed by the French high command. M. Le Ourq listened without comment and went patiently over the battle maps and the brief reports of the officers who had examined the captive.

"We have every reason to believe that the Germans are on the verge of launching another great drive in a last desperate trial at Paris," Colonel de Foret concluded. "For a month they have been gathering their forces above Château Thierry since their plunge through the British armies. Surprise is their greatest weapon—surprise and the success that follows a surprise attack. If we can learn their attack day and check their main blow for a single day, they will not have what you call the wine of success to drive them on—and then our armies can counter-attack with the aid of the Americans."

"You got not one bit of information from the *leutnant* in twenty hours of questioning?"

"Nothing, Monsieur," the colonel confessed. "All we did, I fear, was to confirm the fellow's arrogant belief in his own Prussian superiority. Each time we set a trap for him, he would see it at once and break into insulting raillery that was so provoking our younger officers had difficulty in keeping their hands from his throat."

"Good!" exclaimed M. Le Ourq sharply. "I mean—it is good that he does not hide himself in silence but depends wholly upon the sharpness of his Prussian intellect. A very conceited man is always a very weak man if you can but detect his vital weakness—just as a nation swollen by mad conceit is most vulnerable. Have you permitted him to sleep?"

"If he has slept it is only within the past half hour since we have left him alone. Our officers were under orders to keep him awake—and now he must be very tired."

"You may take me to him at once," Monsieur directed. "I would prefer to be with him alone."

III

MONSIEUR LE OURQ crossed the great salon silently and seated himself at the massive carved table of Circassian walnut for his rôle in the game. The prisoner, who sat nodding

at the table, awakened with a start at the creak of Monsieur's chair; but at sight of a mere civilian his nose rose in unfeigned disgust.

Monsieur studied Leutnant von Fessler intently without appearing to do so. He saw a man of perhaps thirty, well built and healthy but with high color in his aquiline, typically Prussian face. The officer was plainly of the Prussian military caste, a fact betrayed by the arrogant set of his mouth and the sinister glint of the insolent blue eyes. Monsieur's practiced eye noted the minor lines and details of the officer's face with growing satisfaction, and particularly the tell-tale mouth with its thin, uneven upper lip set close above a lower lip that was thick and pendulous. The mouth, despite its arrogant set, betrayed to Monsieur a certain unconquerable weakness that the intelligence officers must have overlooked, or failed to recognize.

"So they've run out of brains in the army and are sending civilians to match wits with me?" sneered the officer, presently. "You will fare no better than did they. I am Prussian and not to be tricked by you silly French. Very soon you French shall pay for your lack of hospitality to me, a Prussian officer."

Making no reply, Monsieur Le Ourq arose and left the room, closing the door gently behind him. He had made his plan of attack and now set about carrying out its details.

"I came to ask if you have given the prisoner food?" he addressed Colonel de Foret.

"Not since dinner of last evening—and then very little," replied the colonel.

"Excellent," commented Monsieur. "Has he been given wine or other drink?"

Colonel de Foret turned in inquiry to the officers who had spent the night in turns with Leutnant von Fessler. It seemed such an unimportant point.

"Not one drop," spoke up Captain Revere feelingly. "He even lowered his abominable pride and asked for a glass of our cognac. It would be a sacrilege to give French vintages to—"

"Will you be so kind as to secure for me at once," Monsieur requested of Colonel de Foret, "some half dozen large bottles of a very select cognac. You may have it delivered to me at the salon."

"It shall be brought to you without delay," replied the colonel. "The cellars of the château are well stocked."

"One other request." Monsieur looked at his watch. "It is now five o'clock, less ten minutes. At ten minutes after the hour of five, I request that you gather your officers and make much noise, as of great rejoicing, so that you can be heard in the salon. Let this continue for some moments, and be repeated briefly from time to time."

"An odd request," commented Colonel de Foret. "But it shall be done exactly as you direct."

MONSIEUR LE OURQ returned at once to the salon and resumed his seat at the massive table, taking no note of the nodding Prussian officer and saying nothing to him. The two sat thus in silence for some time until the Prussian finally fell fast asleep. Monsieur prodded him gently with his walking stick across the table.

"What is the meaning of this?" the officer demanded angrily, awakening with a start. "I am entitled to the ordinary courtesies of a gentleman."

"I meant no offense," Monsieur told him mildly. "My instructions are that I keep you awake."

"Ha, I have worn them down!" Leutnant von Fessler exclaimed. "Must they go for sleep before they match their wits once more with mine?" His eyes gleamed proudly at this flattering thought. "Twenty hours I sat with them, even though they came in relays," he boasted. "They will get nothing from me, no matter how many hours of sleep they rob me of in their foul inquisition."

"You wrong them—they are hard at work, and not asleep," said Monsieur Le Ourq. "They have great plans upon which they must spend their time and so they awakened me to keep watch over you."

"Great plans!" sneered the Prussian. "Plans for their retreat perhaps? France very shortly will be in better hands. I will then have redress for the humiliation of being poked by a civilian while asleep."

"Germany is lost," rejoined Monsieur quietly. "Her secrets are in our hands. Your cause is lost—and soon such of you as are left will flee in ruin back across the Rhine."

Leutnant von Fessler laughed aloud, a laugh of derision. "So," he roared, "that is your game. You are here to trap me. Your military intelligence has failed and they have sent for you. I take it you must be some sort of a secret service civilian in the service of the government. Let me remind you again that you deal with a Prussian grenadier."

"I am a doctor," responded M. Le Ourq. "I am not interested in asking you questions. I am here to keep you awake—and myself at the same time."

He lapsed into silence. An aged attendant of the château brought in the bottles of cognac and placed them on the floor under an end of the table, as he had been instructed to do. Monsieur drew the cork of a bottle, raised it to his lips and set the bottle on the table between them.

The Prussian promptly took the bottle, without asking permission. A mere civilian was not to be treated with the same consideration as a French officer. He raised it to his lips and drank freely.

Monsieur raised his hand in a gesture of protest.

"Not to be compared with our own vintages," said Leutnant von Fessler, ignoring the Frenchman's gesture as he returned the bottle to the table. "But since there is nothing better and I must be deprived of my sleep, it is slightly better than nothing."

"I did not invite you to partake of my cognac," Monsieur said caustically.

"If you had, I should have spurned it," leered the Prussian, flushing angrily at the affront. "It is beneath the dignity of a Prussian grenadier to accept the hospitality of a French civilian."

The two men lapsed into strained silence after this exchange. Presently Monsieur's ponderous head fell slowly forward on his chest and he pretended to sleep, not even the chiming of the hour of five o'clock recalling him. At ten minutes after the hour there were the sounds of a noisy demonstration in another part of the château. Monsieur roused himself. He saw with satisfaction that the bottle on the table now was nearly empty.

"What folly is that?" Leutnant von Fessler demanded thickly, roused by the incongruity of revelry at a time when the fate of France hung in the balance. "Perhaps they drown their sorrows in drink."

M. Le Ourq raised his eyes to the Prussian's face and saw that his cheeks were flushed and his eyes aflame from the burning cognac in his empty stomach.

"They celebrate the end!" Monsieur exclaimed joyfully. "It means that the great battle plans of our enemies have fallen into our hands and that we shall be able to destroy the Prussian armies."

"*Schweinhand*—you lie!" shouted the *leutnant*. "Nothing can save you. It is destiny that the strong shall survive. It is written in the book that we shall rule the world. Nothing can prevent it any more than you can turn back the tides or control the winds!"

The *leutnant's* eyes burned with passion, his cheeks flamed, his whole manner reflecting arrogant defiance. He leaped from his seat and began an agitated pacing of the floor, walking stiffly and proudly, almost at the goose-step. Monsieur smiled inwardly and drew the cork of another bottle of cognac, placing the bottle on the large table. The Prussian Junker spirit unmasked, he reflected.

"Come, a toast to the Kaiser's downfall!" Monsieur proposed jubilantly, raising the empty bottle. "It is inevitable."

"A real toast!" rejoined the Prussian hotly, seizing the other bottle and raising it above his head with a proud gesture. "To the downfall of the *verdamnte* French. It is even closer at hand. *Deutschland über alles!*"

"To the Allied Armies that, before this week ends, shall crush their enemies in battle! Such is the law of God," proposed Monsieur as the Prussian drank his own toast avidly and alone.

Leutnant von Fessler lowered his cognac in an uproar of taunting laughter and pointed unsteadily at the rays of sun streaming in at the window. Then he retaliated with another dire toast—one that upheld the honor of the Prussian cause—the cause he must defend against the insulting jibes of this low French civilian who would hold a respectful tongue in his mouth if he but knew the fate that was in store for him.

"To the Prussian armies," he raved, "that before the sun of another day shall come triumphantly down the Valley of the Marne. Nothing can stop them. The die is cast." The *leutnant's* passion rose to white heat as he poured forth the defiance

of the Prussian Junkers, caution swept aside, reason unseated by the flood of arrogant pride that now raged unchecked within the man's breast. "Tonight shall come our hour of destiny," he shouted dramatically. "You shall know it when it comes—all France shall hear it—for it shall be ushered in by the music of our great guns. Ah, such a serenade as our cannon shall give to the hour of one o'clock. Set down that hour, I tell you. It is the hour of destiny—the hour of *Friedensturm*—our hour of peace! The greatest hour history has recorded. The day shall see our invincible grenadiers leading the triumphant march to Paris. And when the sun rises again—it will shine on the broken wreckage of your regiments—running in terror before our victorious generals. The great Wilhelm has ordered it himself and what His Imperial Majesty—"

He broke off sharply, as if a flickering remnant of reason had swept into his throbbing brain as the mad burst of passion spent itself for the moment. His eyes started and he leaned heavily against the table, his hand pressed to his wet brow. Monsieur broke in quickly, flinging at the Prussian a new and stinging taunt to stir the flood of passion. As the officer's voice rose angrily again, Monsieur quietly drew the top from a third bottle of the ancient cognac and placed it on the carved table.

THE bells in the village of Meaux were chiming the hour of six o'clock when M. Le Ourq appeared quietly in the great reception hall across the château. Colonel de Foret sensed, rather than saw his approach, and sprang from the chair in which he had been dozing. With the other officers he hurried to Monsieur, trying vainly to read success or failure in the placid face.

"What news—what news do you bring us!" exclaimed the colonel, unable to hold back his impatience.

"Do you wish to take notes—or shall I write down my report to you?" Monsieur inquired calmly.

"If you have news, I implore that you give it to us instantly by word of mouth," pleaded Colonel de Foret.

Monsieur's voice was clear, even and unruffled as he spoke. "The great German attack is hard upon us," he said. "Their troops maneuver for the assault tonight.

Their artillery opens fire at one o'clock of tomorrow morning—July fifteenth. Their foot troops cross the Marne in flat boats and strike at dawn."

Colonel de Foret's hand trembled violently as he sought to jot down this portentous news. "*Mon Dieu*, can you be sure of the truth of this!" he cried. "It means—"

"Their forces are massed for attack extending from Château Thierry to the vicinity east of Rheims," Monsieur continued, in the same even monotone, ignoring the interruption. "They will make their main effort down the Valley of the Marne, through the Americans, for whom they hold the greatest contempt. The Fifth and Sixth regiments of Prussian grenadiers will lead the assault at Château Thierry. Wilhelm himself will be present on the field and the armies of the main blow will be commanded by von Eben and von Boehm. They expect to reach Paris within five days of fighting—and to force a German peace within the month."

The pad and pencil had fallen from Colonel de Foret's unnerved hand. There was no gauging the significance of Monsieur's word. It was the greatest betrayal of the world's greatest military secret. If correct, it meant that the Germans were doomed to disaster. There was yet ample time in which to lay the titanic trap that would wreck the Prussian main blow and wreak grim-disaster upon the whole Prussian cause.

"Can you be certain, Monsieur," Colonel de Foret gasped. "If that Prussian has tricked you—it can only bring disaster to our own armies if they move on this information. Are you—"

"I have not been tricked," replied Monsieur with convincing certainty. "I stake my good name, my honor, everything upon the accuracy of what I have told you."

"Quick!" shouted Colonel de Foret turning to the officers in high excitement. "Order the fastest cars. We go at once to army headquarters. Such news cannot be trusted over the wires."

IV

ON THE evening of the third day thereafter, Monsieur Le Ourq gathered his effects together and prepared for his return to Paris. His work was ended. The game that had been

waged at the massive carved table of Circassian walnut in the white château was ended. Out of it destiny had been shaped, momentous history written, the cornerstones of empires crumbled.

There no longer was uncertainty of the Prussian movements. The Allied cannon had opened at midnight on that fatal night of their great attack, so that the hour of one o'clock became an hour of bloody disaster. Now they were rushing back across the Vesle, the first stage of their return beyond the Rhine. Their contempt for the unseasoned Americans had been changed to terror of an olive-drab enemy that hung relentlessly at their flying heels.

Colonel de Foret roused himself from the verge of utter exhaustion to bid farewell to his distinguished guest. His officers, who with their colonel had slept little if at all through these last three historic days, gathered about the two at formal salute, as if honoring some great French general.

"France can never repay you for your great service," said Colonel de Foret. "I am sending forward, as soon as circumstances in these great hours will permit, a full report of your achievement."

"Please do not do that," M. Le Ourq responded earnestly. "Let it merely be set down that my beloved son brought in, at the cost of his life, the information that served his country so well. I did but little—nothing more than to complete the task he so gallantly begun. It is my profound wish that no other details be set down."

The colonel smiled. "We have what must prove a very great personal reward for you, Monsieur," he said, a mild enthusiasm creeping into his weary voice. "It is military law, as you well understand, that we can take no action against Lieutenant von Fessler for the killing of your son."

"It was the war—the mass madness of these Junkers that took my son," broke in Monsieur. "I do not hold this young Prussian to personal account."

"Nevertheless you shall have your full revenge," Colonel de Foret continued, rubbing his hands. "Even as Frenchmen, our loathing of the man knows no limit for his foul betrayal of his country. We shall, in proper time, deliver him to his own service and let his deeds be known

to them. They will deal with him in proper fashion—their hands will work out your revenge."

M. Le Ourq's graven face showed emotion for the first time since he came to the château—a look of pained amazement.

"That would be unspeakable injustice," he said intently. "It cannot be charged to Lieutenant von Fessler that he betrayed his countrymen."

Colonel de Foret and his officers looked at Monsieur as if thunderstruck by this amazing statement.

"I have thought it the most shameless betrayal since Judas—the act of a craven wretch," said the colonel hotly.

"On the contrary, Lieutenant von Fessler was loyal to the last," replied Monsieur Le Ourq while the others now stared as if in doubt of his reason. "It was his furious loyalty—the furious loyalty of Prussian arrogance, that served our very good purpose—that and your excellent French cognac."

"You speak strangely, Monsieur," responded the colonel. "Perhaps you are not well after these long hours of strain."

"Let me recall," said Monsieur Le Ourq, remaining unperturbed, "the theory that I gave to our high command of the weakness of the Prussian cause. You heard me speak and will remember. Was it not that they would be ruined by their mighty pride—the pride of the Prussian military caste that feeds only upon its own mad dreams of world empire?"

Colonel de Foret glanced significantly at his officers. It was the very thing he had been telling them when interrupted by Monsieur's arrival from Paris.

"My idea—the result of my studies—has had no finer test than this," Monsieur continued. "I fanned this Prussian's insolent pride to white heat—and at a time when our excellent cognac had deprived him of his caution and his lesser qualities. Does not a man who is inflamed by drink reveal his innermost self—the emotions that are strongest within him—emotions that he might hold in discreet restraint when sober? So it was, gentlemen, that he poured forth his innermost soul in noisy boasting—in his insolent hatred of everything that challenged the success of the Prussian military dream. Since he was unarmed and in our custody, there was no other way in which he could defend his

caste, except by picturing the destruction that his kind would wreak upon us."

"Then he did not break down and tell —" broke in Colonel de Foret.

"Never for an instant did he weaken," said Monsieur. "These German military Junkers will never quit of their own accord. They will cling to their dream forever in their red pride, hoping for the day of destiny. But hunger—and the sight of fathers and sons piled high to the height of mountains—will bring sanity back into the minds of the masses. And the day will come—it must be almost here with this last defeat—when the people, back in their right minds, will turn upon their bungling masters and refuse to send more of their flesh and blood to feed the unquenchable Junker lust. In that hour there shall come peace."

M. Le Ourq turned again to depart, bowing gravely to the officers whose hands rose instinctively to salute.

"I shall see to it, then," said Colonel de Foret, "that this Prussian's pride is humbled by the knowledge of your great generosity in sparing his life. I shall not

hesitate to tell him the fate we had planned for him."

Monsieur raised a protesting hand. "That would be even more inhuman and cruel if you will but reflect, my Colonel," remonstrated Monsieur. "If he but knew what he has really done, a man of his pride would only suffer the tortures of the damned—and in the end you would find him strangled at the end of his own waist belt—if he could find no better way of self destruction."

"Does Monsieur forget the act of this man in taking the life of Lieutenant Le Ourq and three others of our gallant sons?" Colonel de Foret challenged him.

Monsieur did not reply at once. He handed his musette bag to the awaiting chauffeur and drew on his linen top coat reflectively.

"*Au revoir*, my friends," he said, at last, avoiding the colonel's words. "It is well that we remember those great words, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' It should be enough for you—as it is for me—that Prussia has been betrayed by her own arrogance."





THE TWINS



JOHN



MARY



SAM

Concerning the Story and its Author

YOU will find a brief and modest bit of autobiography about Kay Cleaver Strahan in *EVERYBODY'S Meeting Place* this month. There, too, you will also find some comment of mine about the story.

I merely want to say here as a foreword that you may have to have a little patience in getting into the story. Mrs. Strahan carefully sets the stage with her characters before starting to spin the threads of this mystery. But your patience will be amply repaid before you get very far.

Here is the glamor of a Western setting, of an unfathomable murder, of characters that are human, understandable and extremely real.

My hope is that you will enjoy *The Desert Moon Mystery* as much as my staff and myself did—and that is saying a great deal.

THE EDITOR.



HUBERT HAND



MARTHA



CHAD



MRS. RICKER

*Beginning a Novel of a Baffling Murder
on a Western Ranch*

The Desert Moon Mystery

By KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

CHAPTER I

THE CANNEZIANOS

I KNEW, that evening in April, when Sam got home from Rattail and came stamping snow into my kitchen, his good old, red, white and blue face stretched long instead of wide in its usual grin, that he had brought some bad news with him: a slump in the cattle market; moonshine liquor discovered again, down in the outfit's quarters; a delayed shipment of groceries from Salt Lake. I, who in the months that were coming, was to live through more shock, and fright, and distress and disaster than should fall to the lot of a thousand women in all of their combined lifetimes, was worrying, then, for fear we should have to be doing without olive oil and canned mushrooms for a few weeks in the ranch-house!

"I had a letter today," he said, "from the Canneziano twins."

I am like a lot of folks who say that they are not superstitious, who just happen to think that it is bad luck to walk under a ladder. More than likely the shivery, creepy sensation I felt, when Sam said that, was due to the cold he had brought in with

him, and was not due to the fact that those words of his were the fore-runners for all of the grim mysteries and the tragedies that made the Desert Moon Ranch, before the end of July, a place of horror.

"How much do they want?" I questioned.

"No, Mary; they want to come here to live."

"Lands alive! For how long?"

"Danielle wrote the letter. She says they want to come here and rest, indefinitely. There was quite a bit in it about the peace of the deserts and the high mountains here in Nevada. She says she longs for it with all her soul, or something like that."

"Danielle," I said, "always was the best of the two. You going to let them come, Sam?"

"Anything else for me to do?"

"Not a thing—for you. There'd be plenty for others. Those girls are no kin of yours. Let me see—they must be able bodied young women, by now. Eight years old when they were here in 1909, makes them twenty-four years old now, according to my figures. Why a couple of women twins, aggregating forty-eight years, should decide to come here and rest their

souls, at your expense, is beyond me."

"I have plenty."

"So has Henry Ford. Why don't they go rest their souls with him? They've got as much claim on him as they have on you. None."

"I reckon."

"Where are they now, anyway?"

"Switzerland."

"Lands alive! I don't pretend to know much about foreign geography, but I've understood that there were a few mountains in Switzerland. Leave those girls rest their souls right there where they are, Sam."

"No—I don't know, Mary. I guess I'll write them a letter and tell them to come along. Lots of room."

I didn't argue any more about it. For twenty-five years I had been housekeeper of the Desert Moon ranch-house, and I had learned, during that time, that there was only one subject, concerning Sam, or the place, on which I could never hope to have any say so. Trying to argue with Sam about anything that had to do, in any way, with Margarita Ditsie, when she was Margarita Ditsie Stanley, or when she was Margarita Ditsie Canneziano, was about as sensible as hoisting a chiffon parasol for protection in the midst of one of our Nevada mountain cloud-bursts.

Margarita Ditsie was of French Canadian parentage; a dark-haired, big-eyed beauty. Her father kept a gambling hole in Esmeralda county in the early days. Her mother had run away from a convent, after she had become a nun, to marry him. The girl had some of the nun, some of the runaway, and some of the gambling house proprietor in her. It made a queer combination.

When she was eighteen years old she came from Carson to visit Lily Trooper, over on the Three Bars Ranch, in north-eastern Nevada, about sixty miles from here. Sam met her there, at one of Ben Trooper's big barbecues. She and Sam were married two weeks later. She was a lot younger than Sam; but, even then, he was the richest man in the valley, with every unwedded woman for a hundred miles around setting her cap for him.

Whether Margarita married him for his wealth, or whether it was to spite the other girls who would have liked to marry him, I don't know. All I know is that Marga-

rita never had a mite of love for him. She stayed with him, though, and acted decently enough for two years, until Dan Canneziano came to the ranch and got a job on it as cowpuncher.

It was during those two years that Sam built this ranch-house for her. He had an architect in New York draw the plans for it, and though new on the outside, with its towers and trimmings, it looks kind of old fashioned. I think it is still the finest house in Nevada. Sam's lead and silver mine had just come in, and there was not anything, from Italian marble fireplaces to teakwood floors that was too grand for what Margarita called the Stanley Mansion. She left it, all the elegance and the luxury, and she broke her marriage vows, for love of this wop cowpuncher. That, I guess, is fair and full enough description of Margarita Canneziano.

I don't blame her. I quit blaming folks for things a good many years ago when, after firing three Chinese cooks in six weeks, I decided that, if we were to live healthy and wholesome, I'd have to take over the job of cooking as well as house-keeping for the Desert Moon Ranch, and set about it, and learned to cook. In other words, when I became a creator myself, I got to know creations and so quit blaming all of them. If I forget to put the soda in the sour milk pancakes, it isn't their fault if they don't rise. They are as I made them. Margarita was as the Lord made her. He, I suppose, either had His own good reasons for turning out such a mess, or else He was tired, or flustered, or, maybe, was just experimenting on the road to something better when He did it.

I SHOULD explain, I suppose, wishing to be honest as possible in spite of the fact that I am writing a mystery story, that Canneziano was different from the ordinary breed of cowpunchers. His father, he claimed, had some highfaluting title in Italy, before he got into a peck of honorable, patriotic trouble and had to skip to the United States to save his neck. That may be true, and it may not. Canneziano had a good education; he talked poetry, and played the violin. Margarita heard him playing, down in the outfit's quarters one day, and had Sam invite him up to the house to play. She accompanied him on the grand piano.

Before long, Dan Canneziano was spending a good part of his time at the ranch-house. Sam, being nobody's fool, soon saw how the land lay; but he, according to his custom then and now, kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. Sure enough, one evening they tried to elope together. Sam went after them and brought them back. I remember, yet, how the three of them looked, coming into the house that night.

Margarita, her head high, defiant, but pretty as a fire's flame. Canneziano, slinking in at her heels, like a whipped cur, expecting worse; and Sam, following behind them, calm as cold turkey. The three of them had about half an hour's talk together. Then Sam herded Canneziano down to the outfit's quarters and, I suppose, told the men to keep him there, for there he stayed until Sam was ready for him again.

The next morning Sam started to the county seat. He reached there that evening. The following morning he got his divorce. He came back to the Desert Moon on the third morning, with his divorce and with a preacher. He sent for Canneziano, and stood by, while the preacher married Margarita Stanley to Daniel Canneziano, decent and regular according to the laws of Nevada.

There it should have ended. It didn't, because Sam never got over loving Margarita. I don't hold that to his credit. I see no more virtue in keeping on loving a person who has proved unworthy of being loved, than I see in hating a person who has turned out to be blameless, or in continuing to do any other unreasonable thing.

At any rate, Sam did it. So when, nine years later, she came back to the Desert Moon, with twin girls, Danielle and Gabrielle, and said that Canneziano had deserted her and the children, Sam took them all right in. I don't know, yet, whether or not they took him in.

Certainly he did not show much surprise when, in about ten days, Canneziano put in an appearance. Sam allowed him to get a good start with his threats, and then he took him across his knees and gave him a sound spanking, and passed him over to Margarita to dry his tears, and washed his own hands and went fishing.

That evening he had one of the men hitch up and take the whole kit and caboodle of Cannezianos to Rattail in time

to catch the east bound train. I am ashamed to say that Sam gave them money. I don't know how much. I shouldn't be surprized if it was more than they had expected to get from their blackmailing scheme. A tidy sum, I'll be bound, for shortly after we heard that Canneziano had opened the finest gambling house south of the Mason and Dixon line, in New Orleans.

Sam wanted to keep the children. He offered to adopt them. Margarita would not consider it. But, several times after that, pale yellow, perfumed letters came to the Desert Moon, and Sam answered those letters with a check. Me, he answered, each time, with, "It is for the little girls, Mary. I can't let little girls go needing."

When Margarita died, in France, seven years after she had paid us her blackmailing visit, Sam, the ninny, wrote to Canneziano and again offered to adopt the girls and give them a good home on the Desert Moon. He got a few insulting, insinuating lines for an answer. Canneziano had his own plans for his daughters, who had developed into rare beauties. He would thank Sam to keep his hands off, mind his own business, and so forth.

It would have made a milder man than Sam Stanley fighting mad. Sam went around all that day, swearing to me that he was through; that he had made his last offer of help to the Canneziano family, had sent his last contribution. I know for certain, though, that he sent five hundred dollars to Gabrielle, after that, in answer to a letter she wrote to him. But, if Sam was soft with the women, he was not soft with Canneziano. He showed up here, beaming and broke, about three years ago. He had left, suddenly, after having seen Sam and no one else, less beaming but quite as broke as he had been when he had come. I thought, maybe, Sam was forgetting that side of the family, and that this might be a good time to remind him.

"Is Canneziano planning to come on later, too, and rest?" I asked.

"Just at present he is in San Quentin, serving a three year's term. Danielle didn't say for what deviltry. His term's up this summer. That is another reason the girls want to come here. Somewhere safe from his persecutions, I think the letter said. Poor little girls," Sam went on, "I reckon

we haven't any idea of what they've been through, all these years."

"I reckon not," I agreed. "But they aren't little girls any more. Seems queer to me, with all the beauty their father was bragging about, that neither of them has married. Twenty-four is getting along."

"I'll bet," Sam answered, "it is because they have never had any decent opportunities. You know how pretty they were as little girls, and how good—"

"Danielle was good enough," I said. "Gabrielle was a holy terror."

Sam let that pass. "Considering," he continued, "the life that they've had to lead, and all, I think it speaks pretty well for them that they have come through straight and clean."

Instead of asking him how he knew that, I said, "You'd be willing, then, to have John marry one of them?"

John, Sam's adopted son, was the apple of Sam's eye. He would have the ranch, and Sam's fortune, other dependents provided for, when Sam died. Whether or not the girl he married would be contented to live on the ranch, and help John carry it on and keep up its traditions, making it one of the proudest spots in Nevada, was a mighty important thing to Sam.

He waited so long before answering my question that I was sure I had hit the nail on the head.

"John," he finally said, "is old enough to take care of himself."

With that he turned and went out of my kitchen, not giving me a chance to say that, though I had lived through fifty-six years, I had never yet seen a man at the age he had just mentioned. I did not care. I felt too vimless for even a spat with Sam. I knew that if these Canneziano girls came to the Desert Moon, they would bring trouble with them. I was right. A merciful providence be thanked that, for a time at least, the knowledge of how terribly right I was, was spared me.

CHAPTER II

JOHN AND MARTHA

I AM not an admirer of men. Looking at most any man, I find myself thinking what a pity it was he had to grow up, since as a little, helpless child he would have made a complete success.

Sam Stanley is different. There is some of the child left in Sam, just as there is, I think, in any good man or woman—a little seasoning of simplicity, really, is all it amounts to—but there is a quality about Sam that makes a person feel that he set out, early in life, to follow the recipe for being a man, and that he has made a thorough job of it. Physically, alone, Sam would make about three of most men, with plenty left over for gravy. But it is not that. It is the something that makes him stroll up, unarmed, to a cowpuncher who is bragging wild with moonshine and clinking with firearms, and say, in that drawling, gentle voice of his, "What's the trouble here, son?" And the something that makes that cowpuncher get polite first, and evaporate immediately after. And Sam white-headed, now, at that.

Why he, as a young man, with a pretty fair education and a tidy sum of money left him by his father, who had been a well thought of lawyer in Massachusetts, should come out here to Nevada, take up his homestead land, and settle content for the rest of his life, has always been more or less of a mystery to me. I will warn you, though, that it is a mystery that doesn't get solved in this story, unless you care to take Sam's explanation of it.

He says that, when his father died, it left him without a relative, who he knew of, in the world. He was twenty years old, and he owned a set of roving toes and an imagination. So he went to California, seeking romance and gold. Finding neither, he took a small boat named *The Indiana*, and came up to Oregon, where he joined a friend of his, named Tom Cone, who had a place on the Columbia River near Rooster Rock.

One day Sam was out in the woods—he said there was nothing to be out in except woods or rain in Oregon in those days—and he heard a noise behind a thicket. He thought Tom, who lived for practical jokes, was getting ready to pull one. So Sam crept up to the thicket, stooping low and making no noise, and shouted "Boo!" at the biggest bear he had ever seen in his life. Sam says he has forgotten what the bear said. He decided, then and there, that the Oregon forests were no place for a man with no more sense than he had; he left them, and came down here to Nevada.

"No forests, no fences, no folks, and a

free view for ten thousand miles;" is the way Sam puts it, "so, I stayed. It was the first place I'd ever found where I didn't feel hampered for room."

He staked out his hundred and sixty acres with Boulder Creek tumbling and roaring through them. He built his cabin, out of railroad ties, in a grove of quaking aspen trees. He hired help, and built fences, and dug ditches, and planted crops, and bought stock. He bought more land. He hired more help, dug more ditches, planted bigger crops, bought more stock. He has been doing that, regularly, ever since. And, of course, he located the lead and silver mine on his property that made him millions if it made him a cent, before it played out. But, in spite of the money that "Old Lady Luck" as he called his mine, made for him, Sam never gave his heart to it. It was the Desert Moon Ranch that he loved, and the money he made from it that he was proud of. That was why, when the honor of the ranch went under, during those terrible weeks last summer, Sam all but went under with it.

After Margarita left the place from her visit of 1909, taking the twins with her, Sam went around for a week or two, with his head cocked to one side as if he was listening for something. I knew what he was missing, and I was not surprised when, one day, he told me he had decided to send to San Francisco and get a couple of children and adopt them.

He wrote to a big hospital in San Francisco and got in touch with a trained nurse who would be willing to come up and live on the ranch and take care of the two children. He had her go to an orphans' home and select the children, and bring them with her when she came. Sam's specifications concerning them were that they were to be a boy and a girl, under ten and over five years old, healthy, American, and brown-eyed. (Sam's own eyes are the color of ball-bluing, giving his face, with his red cheeks, and his white beard, the patriotic effect I have mentioned.)

The nurse came early in September with the two brown-eyed children, named Vera and Alvin. Sam at once re-named them. John, he said, was the only name for a boy; and Mary the only name for a girl. But, since my name was Mary, he would let the little girl have Martha, which

meant, according to Sam, "Boss of the Ranch."

The nurse's name was Mrs. Ollie Ricker. If you can imagine a blue-eyed, pink-cheeked, yellow-haired bisque doll, turned old, you will have a good idea of her appearance at that time. I don't know how old she was then. I don't know how old she is now. Younger by many years than I am, I am sure; and yet she has always seemed old to me; old with the sudden, but inevitable oldness of a wrecked ship, or a burned down house, or a felled tree, that makes a body forget that a year ago, or perhaps only yesterday, it was a fresh, new thing. She never talked. I do not mean that she never chatted, or gossiped. I mean that she never said one word, not, "Good-morning," nor, "Good-night," nor, "if you please," nor, "thank you," if she could possibly avoid it. At the end of sixteen years of daily association with Mrs. Ricker, that is, up to the time of the second murder on the Desert Moon, I knew exactly as much about her past life as you know at this minute.

John, at that time, was nine years old. He was as bright, and as upstanding, and as handsome, as any little fellow to be found anywhere; bashful at first, but ready and glad to be friendly, with an uplifting smile that wrinkled his short nose and that would wheedle a cookie out of a pickle jar. I may as well say, now, that this description of John, at nine years old, is as good a description as I can give of John at twenty-five, if you will draw his height up to six feet, and put on weight accordingly.

Martha, when she came to us, was a frail, white-faced mite, with enormous brown eyes that looked as if they had been removed from a Jersey heifer and set in her white face. The papers from the orphanage gave her age as five years; but even I, who knew less about children than it was decent for any woman to know, soon saw that something was wrong. She walked well enough, but she could scarcely talk at all. Her ways and her habits were those of a two year old infant, yet she was far too large for that age. Before she had been with us a week I knew that Martha was not quite right in her mind.

Mrs. Ricker knew it too. Her excuse was, that she had chosen Martha because she was so pretty; that she had had no

opportunity to judge her other characteristics. She insisted that she thought, with proper care, Martha would develop normally.

I knew better. Sam knew it, too. But, when I begged and besought him not to adopt her, he brought out an argument good and conclusive for him.

"If I don't adopt her, and take care of her," said Sam, "who the heck would?"

So adopt her he did. And he spent a small fortune on doctors, specialists, for her. None of them could do anything. It was, they said, a hopeless case of retarded development. So, at twenty-one years of age, Martha, though the care and doctoring had given her a fine healthy body, had the mind of a child of five or six years—not too bright a child, either. That was at best. At worst—well, no matter. Entirely harmless, the doctors said; but I always had my doubts.

Sam tried all sorts of teachers for her, too; bringing them from back East and paying them sums to stagger. But, in the end, we found that Mrs. Ricker was better with her than anyone else. She never pretended any particular love for Martha, but she took care of her, and kept her sweet and clean, and put up with her tempers, when many a better woman than Ollie Ricker would have gone away in disgust. I am not saying that, if there is a Judgment Day, as many say and some believe, I'd care to be standing in Ollie Ricker's shoes, if she is wearing them at that time; but I do say that her gentleness, and her patience, through all those years with Martha, should be counted to her credit, whether or no.

CHAPTER III

HUBERT HAND

IT WAS three years after Mrs. Ricker came to the ranch, bringing John and Martha, that Hubert Hand put in his appearance. He had got Mr. Indian Chat Chin, as everybody called him, to bring him up from Rattail in his old surrey. Hubert Hand was something of a dude in those days, though he has well outgrown it since, and I remember yet how comical he looked, sitting up there so stiff and fine in his light gray overcoat and gray fedora hat, with that big Roman nose of

his protruding out and up, disdainfully, above his little mustache, and apparently above all consciousness of dirty old Mr. Indian Chat Chin and the rattle-trap rig that they were riding in.

Mr. Indian Chat Chin stopped his old nag at the entrance to the driveway, and Hubert Hand climbed carefully down and came up the road, swinging a walking cane like he was leading a parade.

Sam and I, as was our custom, went walking down to meet him.

He took off his hat to me, and said to Sam, "I wish to see the owner of this ranch."

"Nobody ever mistook me for a fairy before," Sam said. "But go ahead. Your first wish is granted. What are the other two?"

Hubert Hand got out his card then. Besides his name it had "Clover-blossom Creamery," and the San Francisco address printed on it.

"Now, Mr. Stanley," Hubert Hand went on, after the embarrassing minute of general introductions, "I am going to be honest with you—"

"Hold on, stranger," Sam interrupted, "you're not. You are going to be as dishonest as heck. Otherwise, you wouldn't bother to tell me you were going to be honest. Go ahead."

Hubert Hand laughed, but he didn't like it. He went ahead, though, and explained that he had an up-and-coming creamery business in San Francisco, but that his physician had told him that he had to live in a high, dry climate with plenty of sunshine and no fog. He had, after inquiries and investigations, decided that the Desert Moon Ranch, altitude seven thousand feet, sunshine three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, to say nothing of the marvelous view of the Garnet Mountains, the hunting, the fishing, and the pure snow water, would fill all his requirements.

"Thanks," Sam said. "When I get ready to start a Gold Cure Sanatorium, I'll drop you a line."

"You won't do business, then?" Hubert Hand questioned.

"I hadn't heard anything about doing business," Sam said.

Hubert Hand's proposition was that he start a creamery, on the Desert Moon Ranch, and supply the valley with ice-cream, butter, and other dairy products.

Sam had the ranch, the cows, and the big ice plant. Mr. Hubert Hand had the knowledge and the equipment. They could divide the profits.

Next to sheep men, I guess there is nothing that cow men hold in lower contempt than they hold dairy farms. Sam was too much disgusted to swear very long.

"But, do you realize, Mr. Stanley," Hubert Hand insisted, "that this entire valley has to depend on Salt Lake City, or on Reno, for its dairy products."

"Listen, stranger," Sam said. "I wouldn't turn the Desert Moon into a place to slop milk around in, if the entire valley had to depend on Hong Kong, China, for its ice-cream cones. Forget it, and come in now and have some supper."

To my knowledge, Hubert Hand, from that day to this has never again mentioned, on the Desert Moon, anything that had to do with creameries. Neither, from that day to this, has he been off of the ranch for more than a couple of weeks at a time.

"By the way," he began, trying to make it sound unimportant, when we had finished supper, "I heard, in Telko, that you were something of a chess player."

"I am, when I can get a game," Sam said. "But chess players, in these parts, are as scarce as hen's teeth. My neighbor, thirty miles east of here, and I used to play regular, two nights a week. But the sun-of-a-gun struck it rich, and like most loyal native sons of this state, he moved to California to spend his money. I'm teaching my boy, John—but he is just a kid. Here, lately, about all I've done is work out the puzzles by myself."

"I play a little," Hubert Hand produced, right modestly.

Sam jumped up and got out his chess table, inlaid ebony and ivory, made special, and his ebony and ivory chess-men.

Hubert Hand beat him the first game in about half an hour. They set up their men again. It took Hubert Hand over an hour that time to beat Sam, but he did it.

"Heck!" Sam said, at the end of that game. "You're hired."

"Hired for what?"

"For whatever you want to call it, except the slopping of milk around. Send for your trunk and name your pay. Why didn't you say, in the first place, that you were a blankety-blank crack chess player?"

I realize, right here, that I am not going

to be able to get through with this entire story, with Sam in it, and continue to modify his vocabulary into hecks and blankety blanks. Wrong, I think it is; but it is true, that men out here do not talk like that. Sam cusses, swears and damns, just as naturally and as innocently as he breathes. The only real trouble about Sam's profanity is that he uses up all his strong words day by day in ordinary conversation; so, when occasions arise that call for something really emphatic, Sam hasn't any words to do them justice. If the demands are not too serious, he reverts and finds a little "Pshaw!" or, "Shoot!" unusual enough to meet the need. If it goes beyond that, he opens his mouth in silence and keeps it open, hoping for a word, until his pipe drops out and scatters ashes and burned and burning tobacco all over everything. I pay no attention to his profanity and small attention to his "Pshaws," and "Shoots." But when his pipe drops, I get down right interested.

To return to Hubert Hand: he accepted Sam's offer, then and there. The next day he titled himself assistant ranch manager, and named his salary at two hundred and fifty dollars a month. Sam paid it without blinking; and kept right on managing the ranch, and everything on it, except, perhaps, myself, without any assistance, the same as he had always done.

CHAPTER IV

CHADWICK CAUFIELD

CHADWICK CAUFIELD, the other member of our household, who was present on the Desert Moon Ranch at the time of the first murder, came only two years ago last October.

It was 'way past bedtime, after ten o'clock, but the radio was brand-new then, and we were all sitting up, listening to a fine program given by the Hoot Owls in Portland, Oregon, when the doorbell rang. Sam answered it. Chad stepped in.

He was wearing white corduroy trousers, a long, yellow rubber raincoat, and a straw hat tethered to its buttonhole with a string. He was carrying a ukulele under his arm and a camera in his hand. He took off his hat, displaying a head full of pretty yellow curls. He smiled, displaying a sweet, gentle disposition. (If there is any better index

to character than the way a person smiles, I have never found it.)

"How-do you do?" he said. "I have come to visit you."

By the time Sam got his pipe picked up, John had got down the forty feet length of living-room and had Chad by both hands, and was introducing him as the friend he had told us about, the friend he had made at Mather's Field, during the war.

The way of that was, John had saved his life for him, down there, and had never since been able to get out from under the responsibility of it. John had found a job for him, after the armistice, and when Chad lost it, John had loaned him money to start out in a vaudeville act. He did fine with that, for three years, and was making good money on the Orpheum circuit, when he got into an automobile accident in Kansas City and was laid up for months in the hospital there. He went back to work sooner than he should have, and spent three months in an Oakland hospital with influenza. John had wired money to him there, and had asked him, again, to come for a visit to the Desert Moon. But, since he had had a standing invitation for years, and since he had sent no word that he was coming, John was as much surprized as any of us that evening.

He had walked over, he explained, from Winnemucca, a distance of a couple of hundred miles. He had had money to buy a ticket no further than Winnemucca. He had had a job there, for a while, dish-washing—a fine job he made of it, I'll warrant—and had used his earnings to get into a solo game, hoping to win enough money to pay for his ticket. He had lost his money, his watch, his coat, vest and shirt. The landlady at Winnemucca, he said, wanted his trunk worse than he did, and, anyway, he never argued with ladies. She had allowed him to take the raincoat—a raincoat in this part of Nevada being about as much use to anybody as a life preserver to a trout—and the funny straw hat—he had worn both in his vaudeville act—and the ukulele. Who wouldn't be glad to let anyone who wanted to take a ukulele anywhere, take it? The camera he had found on the road between Shoshone and Palisade. He had named it, "Unconscious Sweetness," and called it "Connie" for short; and he was always plum daffy about it; taking expected and

unexpected pictures of all of us at all hours and in all places, and pasting them in big albums with jokes and such written underneath.

It is hard to give a fair description of Chad. He was a little, pindling fellow. Around Sam and John and Hubert Hand he looked about as dainty and trifling as the garnish around the platter of the Thanksgiving turkey. He seemed kind of like that, too; like the extra bit of garnishing that makes life's platter prettier and nicer—absolutely useless, maybe, but never cluttery.

Until after he came, I had not realized how little real laughing any of us had done. We had been happy enough, and content; but we had never been much amused. He amused us. He made us laugh. He took the mechanical player off of the old grand piano, and played it as we had never before heard it played. He spoke pieces and sang funny songs until we held our sides with laughing. He was a ventriloquist, and a mimic besides. He could imitate all of our voices to a T.

He had been with us about a week before any of us knew that. I was in the kitchen, one day, when I heard someone come into the butler's pantry.

"Mary," Sam's voice called from there, "you are fired. Bounced. You haven't made a cake in two days, nor doughnuts in three. You are getting too lazy and worthless for the Desert Moon—"

I tottered; but, just before I fainted clear away, here came that grinning little ape, dancing and kicking his heels in an airy-fairy dance, but still speaking in that gentle, drawling voice of Sam's.

I laughed until I had to sit down and lean on the table. I begged him, then, not to give it away for a few days; and the fun he and I had, for the next week, would make a book in itself.

Martha adored him. He played with her by the hour. He made two dolls, Mike and Pat, for her, and he would let them sit on her knees while he made them talk for her. He had to treat her as he would treat a child, of course; but he managed, what the rest of us did not always manage, to treat her as if she were a good, sensible child, not too young to be polite to. Chad had the nicest manners of any man I have ever known.

At the end of November, when he began

to talk about leaving, Sam offered him a hundred and fifty a month to stay on. He said, like Hubert Hand had said, "What for?"

"For living," Sam said.

Chad laughed and shook his head.

"Double it, then," Sam urged. "I wouldn't have you leave the place, and Martha, for three hundred a month; so why shouldn't I pay it to have you stay?"

Chad never would take any regular money from Sam. But he stayed on and got what he needed, such as clothes, and razor blades, and films for Connie, and had them charged to Sam's accounts. He called himself the "Perpetual Guest—P. G." for short, but some of the others said it stood for "Pollyanna Gush" and called him "Polly" to twit him. Pollyanna may not be literature, I don't know; but a person of that nature is most uncommonly pleasant to have around the house.

The only time I ever felt any differently about Chad was right after Sam broke the news to the assembled household that we were to be visited by a couple of lady twins from Switzerland. Chad began, then, to practise a new song about "sleep little baby," and to permit the most ear-splitting sounds to issue from the back of his throat. He called it yodeling; and said that yodeling was Switzerland's chief export, and that he was practising up to make the ladies feel at home. I declare, it nearly drove me out of my wits. A disturbing element, they were, you see, from the very first.

CHAPTER V

THE ARRIVAL

THE girls got here on Friday, the eighth of May. Sam and I rode down to Rattail in the sedan to meet them, and John took the small truck down to bring up their baggage.

Number twenty came roaring up, on time, and stopped with a snort of angry protest, as it always does when it has to stop at Rattail, which is not often; not more than a dozen times a year, at best, I guess.

Sam and I hurried down the tracks to where the porter's white, rapidly swinging arms were piling up the shining black baggage.

I don't know what there is about riding in a train that turns folks haughty and supercilious; but there is something that does. A person who would be right hearty and human on his own two feet, sits in a car window and looks out at the platform people as if they were something he wanted to be careful not to step in. By the time I had passed fifty or more windows, and had reached where the girls were standing, I was so heated up I couldn't find a word to say but, "Pleased to meet you," which was not the truth.

One of them smiled real sweet, and said, "Mary! Upon my soul you haven't changed at all in sixteen years," and made as if to kiss me; so I kissed her at once.

The other one gave me a jerky nod, and stood there, watching the train pull out, until Sam, who had been poking along behind me, managed to catch up.

"Uncle Sam," she exclaimed, laughing and standing on tiptoe, and putting her hands on his shoulders, and tipping her pointed chin up to him, "you dear, to have us! I had always remembered that you were the biggest man in the world, and now I see that I was right about it."

Sam didn't kiss her, as she had expected him to. He patted her hands, took them down off his shoulders and held them a minute before he dropped them and reached to shake hands with the twin who had kissed me.

"Well, now," he said, "this is sure great. Little girls all grown up to ladies, and coming to see their old uncle." (He had bitten on that uncle bait, though he was no more their uncle than I was.) "Which of you is which, now? Let's get you sorted out, so I can call you by name. I used to get you all mixed up, when you were little tykes—couldn't tell one from the other."

"You won't have that trouble any more," said the one who had nodded at me. "I am Gabrielle, and that prim little puss is Danielle. People never get confused about us, any longer."

Indeed, I should think not. Danielle was dressed pretty and neat in a suit of gray about the shade of a Maltese cat, with a nice little round hat to match, and not more than ten inches of gray silk stocking showing between the edge of her skirt and the tops of her neat gray pumps. Gabrielle had on a floppy coat thing, that looked more like a bathrobe, cut off at the knees,

the way it lopped and draped, with nothing but a big buckle on one hip to hold it together at all. It was about two shades darker than good cream tomato soup. Her hat was as near as she could match it, I guess; and, though it was small, it was soft and lippy. Her stockings, sixteen inches of them in sight, if an inch, were a kind of sickly cross between yellow and pink. Her black satin shoes had stilt heels and silver buckles. She wore, also, a pair of earrings, dangling almost to her shoulders, that looked like the spinners the boys use here, in the fall, when they go after the big trout.

The population of Rattail had come running to the depot, of course, when the train stopped; and, at last, swaggering his way among males, females, Indians, cow-punchers, and dogs, here came John.

He doesn't usually trim his walk with that swagger; but, bashful as an overfed coyote, he is hard put to it, at times, to cover up this deficiency of his. So he swings his shoulders, and talks loudly, and boasts around, when a person with a keen ear could hear his knees clicking together.

"La-la!" exclaimed Gabrielle, when she caught sight of him, "Who is this picturesque man thing coming toward us?"

John did look pretty fine, wearing his new corduroy suit, and his shining new leather putties, and his new sixteen dollar sombrero. He had even gone so far as to button up the collar of his brown flannel shirt. I was sorry he had not been around, when the train came in, to add tone to Sam and to me.

"He," Sam answered, beaming with pride, "is my boy, John."

"How thrilling!" chirped Gabrielle. "It is like living in a cinema, isn't it Danny?" And off she went, sort of skipping along the tracks, to meet him.

When they met, John gave her about the same attention that a passenger gives the ticket chopper at the gate, in a city depot, when he sees the train he is trying to catch moving slowly out through the yards. He pulled off his hat, with a bow, but he passed her, walking very fast. I thought that he was so flustered that he did not know what he was doing. He knew. He was headed straight for Danny. He had been in the freight house since long before the train came in, sizing up from a safe distance the girls' arrival. Then he had

sneaked out the back way, up past the station house, and around it and back again, to give the appearance of having just that minute got into Rattail.

"John," I said, when he reached Danny and me, and stopped short, like he had just been lassoed from the rear, "this is Danielle Canneziano.

John dropped his hat in the alkali dust, his new hat, and reached out and took both of Danny's hands in his. Falling on his knees in front of her would not have been much showier.

"I—" he produced, "I—I heard you laugh."

To me, it barely made sense; but she seemed to find it interesting and important.

"Really?" she said, and sort of trilled it full of meaning.

Standing there, with my new shoes hurting my corns, and Sam and Gabrielle completely out of sight around the corner of the depot, I felt as necessary, useful and welcome as a hair in the soup, and a sight more conspicuous. Rattail's population was beginning to close in around us. I pulled at John's sleeve; but I declare, if a freight hadn't come along, forcing those two to get off the tracks, they might have been standing there yet, gazing into each other's eyes.

I was half way home, riding beside Danny in the sedan, when Gabrielle's laughing out again, at some remark of Sam's, made me remember that she had been the only one who had done any laughing when we had met. Danny had only smiled. So, if that laugh was what had put John clear off his head, he had picked the wrong twin.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET

THE first minute when I heard that the Canneziano girls were coming to the Desert Moon, I was certain that they were not coming for the peace of the mountains and the deserts. Going on from there, I questioned myself as to what reason any Canneziano had ever had for coming to the ranch, or for writing to the ranch. The answer was, to get money. I tried to think that they would stay a few months, long enough to put themselves in Sam's good graces, ask him for a tidy sum,

and leave. But they had not been on the place two days before I knew that, though that might be a minor part of their plan, it was not the major part; that there was something far less simple, something, probably, treacherous and sinister at the root of this visit of theirs to the Desert Moon.

On the evening of their arrival the girls had unpacked their trunks in their bedrooms. The next morning the boys carried their trunks to the attic. Going through the upper hall, later that same morning, I saw one of the empty drawers that had fitted into their new-fangled trunks, lying beside the door to the attic stairway.

I hate clutter. I picked it up and carried it upstairs. I went in all good faith; but I wear rubber soled shoes around the house, and the stairs are thickly carpeted; so the girls, who were up there, did not hear me coming. Just before I got to the turn in the stairs, I heard one of the girls say:

"I am sure that there is no use in searching the house. In the first place, he never could have gotten it into the house, without being seen."

"You are too sure of everything, when you are unsure of anything," the other girl answered, and I thought, since the voice was louder and, somehow, richer, that it was Gaby's. "Stop being sure, and try being sensible. We must find it. We have very little time. How do you know whether he could have brought it into the house or not? There is a back stairway."

Fool that I was, I kept right on going up the stairs. It took me a while to develop the poll-prying, eavesdropping, sneaking, and generally despicable character that I did develop later.

"Did you girls lose something?" I asked, when my head had poked up to where I could see them.

Danny jumped, from being startled, but Gaby never turned a hair.

"Only a trinket of Dan's," she said. "Possibly she never packed it at all."

I gave them the trunk drawer and came back downstairs, wracking my brain with questions.

Who was the "he" who had, or who had not gotten something into the house? The something that they must find, and had very little time in which to find it. And, land's alive, what was the something?

I resolved to say nothing, but to watch

those two girls, like a hawk, from then on. I did so. But it was three weeks before I heard anything more at all, though I saw a great deal.

I saw those girls searching, searching everlastingly, the entire place. I saw them go to the cabin, and stay inside of it for hours. I saw them in the barnyards, and in the barns, searching. I saw them down in the outfit's quarters, when the men were all away. I heard them get up late at night, and sneak out of the house, and come back in the early hours of the morning. And, once or twice, I thought that I saw them seeing me, as I watched them, and then I was afraid.

It was during those three weeks that Danny and John announced their engagement. My own opinion is that they got themselves engaged the first five minutes they were alone together; but that they had gumption enough to wait for ten days before telling it.

Sam gave them his blessing. That is to say, he said that any agreement they wanted to make was all right with him, if Danny was sure she would be satisfied to live on the Desert Moon, and if they would wait a year to be married. They agreed to this, the year of waiting, reluctantly. Sam, whose one bad habit, not counting his pipe, is using suitable and unsuitable quotations on all suitable and unsuitable occasions, assured them that a year was as a day on the Desert Moon; but that didn't seem to make them any happier. The only people who were downright pleased with Sam's decision were Gaby and myself. I, for certain reasons of my own. Gaby, because she was choosing to consider herself also in love with John.

I realize that this is crowding pretty fast what the books call "love interest." I realize, too, that I have not given any description of John that would account for two traveled ladies coming to the Desert Moon and, at once, falling in love with him.

He had, as I guess I've signified, a heap more than his share of masculine good looks. Outside of hat and collar advertisements, I don't know that I've ever seen even pictures of men that were any better looking than John was. The way he lived, and dressed, and rode, made him seem sort of romantic, too, I suppose. A Santa Fé man, who met him once when he was taking cattle back East for Sam, offered

him a surprising salary to come to the Grand Canyon and live around there, in order to impress and delight the Eastern young lady tourists. John was simple-hearted, and slow spoken; but I guess most women don't mind that in men. Too, he was a good boy, all the way through. And, of course, he had plenty of money, now, and would have a million or more, not counting the ranch, when Sam died.

GABY made no bones about her feelings for John. I did not do as John did, and set all of her open advances toward him down to sister-in-lawly affection. Still, I didn't believe that she really thought she was in love with John, until I hid in the clothes-closet that evening and heard Danny and her talking together.

The closet arrangement was a fortunate one for my purposes. It was between the girls' rooms, with heavily curtained doorways, leading into each room, and a door at the end with a transom for ventilation, leading into the hall. This closet had originally been a part of the hall, going down between the two rooms. But, in 1912, when Sam had had the ranch house remodeled inside, they had turned the closet spaces for these rooms into two bathrooms, necessitating the present arrangement of a double closet.

The dozens of gowns and frocks—nothing so ordinary as mere dresses—that the girls had brought with them, hanging on padded hangers from the long rods, made as good a hiding place as anyone could ask for; especially, since I always took care to unscrew the light globe in the closet when I went in, so that it seemed to be all right, but would not light when the wall switches were pressed.

I had gone in there so many evenings, during the past three weeks, and had heard nothing for my pains that it was a wonder I had decided to try it again that evening. It was not luck, though. Gaby's actions, that evening, toward John had been so downright disgusting, sitting on the arm of his chair, and trying to coax him out of the house to see the mountains by moonlight, and hanging herself around his neck when they danced together, and so on, that I had a notion Danny might have a little conversation ready for her when she could get her alone.

I had waited about ten minutes when I heard the door of Gaby's room open. I was so tickled I all but squealed, when I heard that Danny had come in with her, instead of going on down the hall to her own room. Evidently they had begun their conversation in the hall, for Gaby's first words were, "Jealous, my dear Dan?"

"I don't know. But it is silly for you to act as you do. John is in love with me."

"Since you are so certain of that, why do you object to my poor little efforts?"

"I've told you. Because they are silly. And—not kind. Why should you try to take him away from me, when you don't want him yourself?"

"Are you sure of that, too?"

"Yes, I am. His good looks fascinate you, and so does his unsophistication. You'd like the fortune he is to inherit. But you would never be satisfied to marry him and live right here for the remainder of your life."

"No. I would not. I'd marry him, if he didn't have a penny—it is you who are always thinking about his fortune—but I wouldn't allow him to bury himself, and his beauty, and charm in this God-forsaken country. I'd get him out into the world, and have him take his place there. With his ability and energy, and with me to help him, what a place it might be! For you to have him is—waste. Waste. You don't know anything about love. You'll never learn. I—I tell you I can't bear it. It isn't fair—" She began to cry, hollow sounding sobs, that seemed to catch in her throat and wrench free from it.

"Gaby. Gaby, dear. Please don't. I am sorry—"

"Waste. Waste. Waste. You are not sorry. Don't touch me!"

"I am sorry, Gaby. But what can I do? I couldn't give John to you, if I wished to."

"You could give me a chance."

"No. I couldn't."

"You are a coward."

"Perhaps. I love him. He means to me, too, peace, and security, and decent living—the things I want most for my life. Why should I risk it all?"

"Coward! Coward! Peace and security! He means life to me, all of it; full and complete. Love, and passion, and adventure and attainment, for him and for me too. Do you think I'll stand by, and allow you to have him, to bury his wonder

in your peace, and smother his possibilities with your security and decent living?"

"I think," Danny answered, "that you will have to. John and I love each other; and we are going to keep each other. You, nor anyone, can change that."

"Suppose I should tell John why we came here?"

"You won't do that. You can't harm me without harming yourself. But, if you threaten that, just once more, I will go straight to John and tell him the truth—"

"You promised—"

"I haven't broken my promise. I shan't, if you don't. But you must know that I haven't any interest left in the thing."

"What about your desire for revenge?"

"That desire was yours, not mine. I never considered that side of it at all."

"Coward! Quitter! Stool-pigeon—"

"That isn't fair, Gaby. I'll help if I can. I have been helping, haven't I? I won't hinder in any way. But the time is short now. Remember that."

"Danny—" There was a new tone in Gaby's voice, sweet like, and appealing. I did not trust it for a minute; but I think Danny did, for she answered, gently, "Yes, dear?"

"Forgive me. Let's be twinny again. Friends?" I could hear the treachery in that as plainly as I could hear the words. I think Danny did not hear it, for she answered, "I do want to be friends, Gaby. I do, truly. Only—please, dear, won't you leave my man alone?"

"And you'll help me. And you won't tell him—anything?"

"Of course I won't tell, Gaby. It is really your secret, now; not mine. And I'll help you, all I can."

CHAPTER VII

THREE RINGS

REVENGE. Out of all that crazy conversation the one word kept pestering me like a leaking faucet. No matter what I was doing, or thinking, that word, revenge, kept drip, drip, dripping, until my mind was fairly drenched with it. I got all mixed up about it. Did people revenge other people, or have revenge on them, or—what? I looked it up in the dictionary. "Malicious injuring in return

for an injury or offense received," it said.

I got a piece of paper and wrote it down. "The Canneziano girls want to injure, maliciously, some one on the Desert Moon Ranch, in return for an injury or an offense received." I crossed out "The Canneziano girls," and wrote, "Gabrielle Canneziano," since Danny had said that she had never considered that side of it at all. It did not help any. It did not make sense.

Since Sam and I were the only people on the ranch who they had known before they came here this time, it seemed as if they had come to injure, maliciously, one of us. I had never done either of them a mite of harm in my life. Sam had never done anything but good for them. Of course, Sam had not been very gentle with their father. But, as I took pains to discover, neither of them had any kind feelings for their father. Gaby said, straight out, that she hated him. Danny, who was too gentle speaking to use such a word as hate, said that she had never liked him, never loved him. Both of them laid their mother's death at Canneziano's door. They thought that his cruelty and his neglect had killed her. It was senseless to suppose that they were harboring a grudge against Sam for anything that he had ever done to Canneziano.

Of course, I see now that all that part of it was as plain as the Roman nose on Hubert Hand's face. How I missed seeing it, even then, I don't know. I was, I guess, like a little boy so busy trying to watch all three rings at the circus at one time that he missed the elephant parade.

The Desert Moon was like that sure enough; like a three ring circus, during the months of May and June. There were the girls, everlastingly searching for something: leaving the house shortly after the men left it, each morning; returning, tired out, just in time for dinner; off again for the afternoon, and coming home just in time to pretty up for supper. After a while, I began to lose interest in that; and, being a woman, I allowed my attention to become distracted by the center ring where all the love interest was going on.

Not that Danny and John were interesting. If there is anything that will make two people duller to all other people than being engaged to each other, I am sure I don't know what it is. Gaby's unceasing efforts to win John away from Danny were

interesting enough, I suppose, to folks who can stand to look at that sort of thing. Personally, I shut my eyes to it as much as possible. Most of my attention I gave to the clown in the ring—to Chad.

I can not explain it, now or ever; but Chad, from the very first, was head over heels in love with Gaby. He had no more chance of winning her, penniless, funny, kind little fellow that he was, than an amateur has of riding an outlaw pony. I told him that, once, in those very words.

"I know it, Mary," he said. "But you are wrong about one thing. I'm not riding for a fall. I'm not even mounted. I know I haven't a chance with her. I know I can't pull one of those stars out of the sky up there with a fishhook. I'm not trying. But I can sit here in the dark and look at the stars, can't I? Stars make all the difference—in the dark. And, maybe, sometime I can serve her in some way. That's all I ask, . . ." So on. If it hadn't been Chad, and therefore heartbreaking, it would have been downright funny.

She never gave him two looks. He couldn't even make her laugh with his jokes and his songs, as he could the rest of us. Once she did deign to allow him to try to teach her the trick of his ventriloquism. She could not learn it, and she was furious with him, and said that he did not want her to learn it. But he followed her about, and waited on her. He brought her pony up to the house, instead of allowing one of the outfit to do it. He brought her desert flowers, which she tossed away to wither. If Connie hadn't had a strong constitution he would have worn her out, taking pictures of Gaby. Page after page in his album filled with, "Gaby by the window;" "Gaby on the porch;" "Gaby and Danny starting on a walk," "Gaby in riding costume;" Gaby here, there, and everywhere. And Martha half mad with jealousy.

Right at first, I think that some of the others thought that Martha's jealousy was something of a joke. I never did think so. Before long we all began to feel that it was more than a little serious. Sam talked to Chad, and to Gaby about it. Chad did the best he could, after that, to be as attentive to Martha as he had been before; but, if he so much as opened a door for Gaby, Martha would go into temper fits, and sulking spells.

As for Gaby, Sam's talk with her made things worse. She had never noticed Chad at all, so she had not noticed that Martha was jealous of him. She welcomed the news as another tool she could use to tease and torment the poor girl. All along she had delighted in teasing and tormenting Martha, though she dared not do it when Sam was present.

The very evening after Sam had talked to her in the morning, Gaby went and sat beside Chad and curled his pretty, yellow curls around her finger.

It was a cloudy evening, not chilly, but Sam had lighted the fire as he always does when he has half an excuse, and Martha was sitting in front of it, pretending to read a magazine. She had been pretending to read that same magazine, on the same page, for the last five years. She seemed to get pleasure out of sitting and holding it in her hands. No other magazine would do.

Of a sudden, this evening, she thrust the magazine in the flames for an instant, jerked it out, and rushed at Gaby with the burning torch. No harm was done. John snatched it and tossed it back into the fireplace. But all of us, except Gaby, had the good sense to be thoroughly frightened.

THINGS weren't ever quite the same for Martha after that. No other magazine, or picture book, would take the place of the one she had burned. She would wander about the house, evenings, quietly, but restless, like a cat who had lost her kittens.

One of Gaby's pleasant little ways was to refer to Martha as an idiot, right before her face.

"La-la!" Gaby exclaimed one evening, when Martha was wandering about, "The idiot gets on my nerves. Can't you make her keep still, Mrs. Ricker?"

"She isn't harming anyone," I said, since Mrs. Ricker, as usual, said nothing. "You leave her alone, and stop talking like that, miss."

"I'm not harming anyone, now," Martha piped up. "But some day, I might. I'd like to. I won't, though," she walked over close to Gaby, "if you'll give me the gold monkey. I'll be good then, for always."

It was a bracelet charm of Gaby's, a gold monkey, about the size of a large almond, with jade eyes. The minute Martha had seen it she had begun to beg

for it. There weren't any monkeys in the jewelry catalogs, but Sam sent off and got her a bear and a turtle. She wouldn't have any truck with them. She wanted that one, particular monkey. Gaby would not give it to her; would not so much as allow her to wear it for a few hours at a time. As usual, this evening, she refused to let Martha touch it.

"Yes, and you'll be sorry," Martha threatened.

She went upstairs and emptied a can of pepper in Gaby's handkerchief box.

She was always playing tricks of the sort on Gaby, if we did not watch her. For my own part, I wouldn't have bothered with watching her but for the fact that, more than often, she got the two girls mixed up and it was Danny whose pretty dress would be tied to the chair to tear, instead of Gaby's; or Danny's hair would receive the contents of Chad's paste-pot; and then Martha, discovering her mistake, would make herself ill with crying and remorse. Just as she had hated Gaby from the start, she had loved Danny; but she could not tell them apart.

It seemed incredible that even Martha could be confused about the two girls; because, if ever girls were opposites, those girls were. Of course, they were the same size, about five feet and two inches tall, I should judge, and the same weight—both of them too skinny to my way of thinking, flat as bread-boards. Their faces, just their faces, did look alike. They both had long brown eyes, straight noses, small mouths—Gaby painted her lips until they looked much fuller and more curved than Danny's—, pointed chins, and complexions the color of real light caramel frosting. Danny's cheeks showed a faint pink, coming and going. Gaby painted her cheekbones, clear back to her ears with a deep orange-pink color. They both had wavy, dark brown hair, cut just the same in the back, real close fitting and down to a point. But Gaby brushed her hair straight back from her forehead, and put varnish stuff on it till it was as sleek and shining as patent leather. She left all of her ears showing, and she always wore big earrings, dangling from them. Danny parted her hair on the side, and allowed it to wave, loose and soft and pretty. She never wore earrings. Gaby's clothes were all loud colored, or seemed to be—black turned

gaudy when she put it on—and they were all insecure appearing, too defiant of paper patterns to be quite moral. Danny's clothes were as neat and quiet as a pigeon's.

No wonder that these frequent mistakes of Martha's made me decide that she was losing her eyesight. I spoke to Sam about it, suggesting that Mrs. Ricker would better take her to San Francisco to visit an oculist.

According to his usual custom, Sam laughed at me. He said that he had about concluded that Martha was the only one on the place who could use her eyes to see deeper than gee-gaws and fol-de-rols.

"If you are insinuating," I said, "that those two girls are alike in any respect, inside or outside, you've lost your senses."

"Why shouldn't they be alike?" Sam questioned. "They are twin sisters. They were brought up together, they have had the same friends, the same teaching, the same environments. Of course they are alike. One of them is play-acting. I don't know which one. I suspect Danielle, on account of John."

I may as well state, right here, that all of this remark of Sam's, with the exception of the girls being twin sisters, was a mistake from beginning to end. I didn't, at the time, know much of anything about their past lives. I did know their present characters. I told him so.

He laughed again, and wanted to know what had become of all my theories concerning our modern young girls. Ever since the war, I had been standing up for them, through thick and thin.

"It takes a pretty stout theory," I admitted, "to hear a young lady called a 'damn good sport,' and see her receive it as a choice compliment."

"Who said that to who?" Sam wanted to know.

"Who do you suppose? Hubert Hand to Gaby, of course."

"Hubert Hand," Sam said, "had better behave himself."

Since Hubert Hand was too selfish ever to love anything that his Roman nose wasn't attached to, his carryings on with Gaby, should be classed, I think, not in the center ring, but as the main attraction of the third ring. And he almost old enough to be her father, with white coming into his hair at his temples!

To this day I have never understood

those two, during those months. Gaby was in love with John. Hubert Hand was in love with Hubert Hand. Yet they hugged and kissed, and seemed to think that calling it "necking" made it respectable. It wasn't a flirtation, with them. It was more like a fight, where each of them was fighting for something they did not want. A perfectly footless, none too wholesome performance.

"You make him behave himself, Sam," I urged.

"He is free, white and twenty-one. And she sure can take care of herself, if ever a girl could. It's none of my put-in."

"What about the rest of us," I said, "forced to watch such goings on?"

"Don't watch. If you watch Belle, and Sadie and Goldie, that is watching enough for one woman."

Belle, Sadie and Goldie were the Indian women I had, at that time, to help me around the place. I suppose they were pretty good girls. They did all the actual work there was to do around the house, except the cooking, with me directing them every step they took. But when I remember how they all deserted me, in the time of our terrible trouble, it makes me so fighting mad that I don't like to give them credit for anything, nor think about them at all, even yet.

CHAPTER VIII

ATMOSPHERE

THE girls had been on the Desert Moon a little better than six weeks when, one evening, Sam came out into my kitchen where I was setting bread. Belle, Sadie and Goldie had gone home, and I had tidied up after them, as usual, and everything in the kitchen was sweet, and clean, and shining. I had the doors tight shut, so I couldn't hear the radio screeching away in the living room, and the windows open, and the evening breeze fresh from the deserts came in, blowing back my ruffled white curtains and purifying the air.

"Mary," Sam began, real solemn for him, "the ancients used to have cities that they called cities of refuge. No matter what a fellow had done, if he could get inside one of those cities, he was safe. Your kitchen always kinda seems like that sort

of a place to me—a city of refuge."

"Lands, Sam," I said, "what have you been up to that you are heading this safety first movement?"

To tell the truth, I was a little put out with him for moseying in there when I was setting bread. Like most men I've known, Sam never had any particular hankering for my company, unless he thought I could be of some use to him. Generally, I am glad and proud to help Sam, any way I can; but not when I am setting bread. There is something about setting bread that gives any moral woman a contented, uplifted feeling that she likes to indulge in, undisturbed.

"I haven't been up to anything," Sam answered, "and I don't aim to be. But, Mary, some time ago you came to me with some suspicions. I laughed them off. I am not laughing now. I'm worried. Queer things are going on around here. What I want to know, now, is what do you know?"

"Nothing. What do you know?"

"Nothing."

"What do you suspect, then, Sam?"

"Nothing. What do you?"

"Nothing."

That, I see now, wouldn't have been a bad place for us both to laugh. Neither of us did.

"Have you any idea," Sam questioned, "why the girls go prowling all over the place, afoot and horseback, daytimes, and nightimes, too, when they should be in their beds?"

I unfolded a dishtowel and spread it over my pan of bread. It was ready for rising and I had not got a bit of uplift out of it.

"If I told you," I said, "you'd only speak your little memory-gem, about so much good in the worst of us."

"No, I won't, Mary. I'm all set for listening."

"Well, all I know is just what I've known all along. They are hunting for something."

"Sure they are hunting for something. But what?"

"I don't know. But, whatever it is, they are going to use it to get revenge, to injure maliciously, somebody."

"Revenge, hell!" Sam said.

"Have it your own way. Only I happened one night to hear Gaby say to Danny that they had come to this ranch for the purpose of revenge."

"Revenge, hell!" Sam repeated himself. "Unless they are sore at me about Canneziano."

"It doesn't make sense. They hate Canneziano. I've about decided that they have come here to get revenge on, maliciously injure, someone who isn't on the place."

"'Brighten the corner where you are,'" Sam scoffed. "But never mind. What else did they say, when you happened to overhear this revenge remark?"

If he was ready, at last, to listen, I was more than ready to tell what little I knew. I told; even to confessing about hiding in the clothes closet.

"Well, well," he drawled, when I had finished my story, "we are probably making a mountain out of a molehill. I wouldn't go pussy-footing around after them, any more, if I were you, Mary. There's a screw loose somewhere, that's sure; but it is not in the Desert Moon's machinery. We've got nothing on our consciences. We don't need to worry."

Don't need to worry! Sam and I, sitting in that peaceful kitchen, talking so smart and frivolous, and deciding that we did not need to worry is a memory I could well be shed of. We didn't need to worry a bit more than if I'd used arsenic in my covered pan of bread; not a bit more than if there had been a den of rattlesnakes in the cupboard under the sink, or gasoline instead of water in the tank on the back of the stove. That is how safe and peaceful we really were, at that minute, if we had had sense enough to know it. When I realize that four weeks from that very evening, three people—

CHAPTER IX

THE CABIN

FOR three days, beginning with the Fourth of July, there was to be a big celebration and rodeo at Telko. Trying to keep cowpunchers on the ranch, when there was a celebration of any sort going on within a distance of a couple of hundred miles, would be about as sensible as trying to keep gunpowder in a hot oven. So all the outfit that was on the ranch—never very many in July—were tinkering with their flivvers, and currying their mounts, and building up their boot-heels,

and washing and ironing, and making elaborate preparations to attend.

Sam suggested at noon on the second of July, while we were at dinner, that maybe all of us would like to go; all, that is except Martha and himself. Celebrations were never good for Martha.

I spoke right up and said to count me out. I know the deserts in July. But the boys were enthusiastic about it, and Danny was interested. Gaby, coming in late, greeted the idea with the same enthusiasm with which a woman greets moths in the clothes closet.

"Whence the crave for a Fourth of July celebration?" she asked.

"We have never seen a rodeo," Danny answered.

"Go, by all means," Gaby said. "Buy pink lemonade. March in the parade. Ride in the Liberty car. Mrs. Magin would be stunning as the goddess of Liberty, with—"

"Don't let my stunningness stop anything," I said. "I am not going."

"We'll think it over," Danny said. "It would be a long, hot ride. Probably we should all have a pleasanter time, right here at home."

But there was something in the way she had said it, too quickly in answer to a look from Gaby, that made me think there was more to her backing out of the plan than had appeared on the surface.

Gaby had just begun her dinner. The rest of us had finished; so, according to our custom, we excused ourselves and went our ways. Chad tried to stay with Gaby, but Martha fussed and insisted that he come with her.

I had a sure feeling that Danny would return, and that she and Gaby would have something to say to each other. I went into the kitchen and told Belle to clean the stove. Nothing made Belle so angry as to have to clean the stove. The angrier she got, the more she clattered. When I stepped back into the pass-pantry, and opened the pass-window a crack, the kitchen sounded as if half a dozen women were busy in it.

Just as I opened the window I heard John say, "I thought Danny was in here."

"No," Gaby said. "But won't you come in and talk to me?"

"What about?"

"About—this."

I dared not peek, so I did not know what she meant until she said. "Why won't you kiss me?"

"Shall I say, I don't want to pick flowers in Hubert Hand's yard?"

"I hate you!"

"Don't be sore at me, Gaby," John said. "But I'm telling you, that's a lot nearer the truth than—than what you usually say."

John was one of the poorest talkers ever heard. One of those strong, silent men supposed to abound in the west, and who are likewise supposed to make every word that they say count. If John's did, they counted backwards.

"My dear, haven't I proved over and over again that I love you?"

"I don't know how."

"In every way. I have made myself ridiculous, here, because I haven't been able to conceal my feelings for you."

"I think," John said, "that most of that stuff you pull is just to spite Danny. It doesn't spite her, though. She knows she's the only girl in the world for me. I wish you'd cut it out—all of that, Gaby. Won't you, and just be good friends?"

"You'd not want me for an enemy, would you?"

"Getting at anything, going any place, Gaby?"

"Perhaps. If Danny should hear that you have made love to me—"

"I have never made love to you. It would be your word against mine. I think Danny would take mine in a show-down."

"You'd lie about it?"

"Gosh, no, Gaby. A lot worse than that. I'd tell the truth about it. Listen here, child; don't you try to make trouble between Danny and me."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing. Except that it wouldn't be healthy for anyone who tried it."

"Boo-oo! Dangerous Dan McGrew stuff? Out where men are men? Killer loose tonight—all that, eh, Johnnie?"

"Nothing like that," he said, and his voice was so gentle that if Gaby had been a puncher she would have reached for her six-gun. "But killing would be too good for the imaginary person we are talking about."

A door opened. "John," came in Danny's voice, "uncle is looking everywhere for you."

"What," Danny questioned, when the door had closed behind John, "made you both look so angry, just now?"

"Nothing important. John had just threatened to kill me, but—"

"Don't be silly."

"Never mind. Are you going to that fools' celebration, with only a day or two left, now?"

"I suppose not, if you don't want me to. I'd love going. I know there is no use in staying here."

"In other words, you would sacrifice my future for a rodeo?"

"That is silly."

"Everything is always silly, with you. I more than half believe that you know—"

"That's sil—I mean, what possible object could I have?"

"Many, my dear. Very many. Though I think that getting rid of me would outweigh the others."

"Gaby, I don't want to get rid of you. I wish you would not be so silly, with John. But you know how eager I was to get you away from the Continent. I wish I knew that you were going to stay right here for always."

"Is that your game? Listen to me, Danielle Canneziano, if I thought that you were keeping this from me, in order to bury me alive in this God-forsaken hole, and force me to watch you and John—"

"Gaby!"

"I've been a fool! Why can't I learn to take into consideration your damn moralities? Understand this, Dan. Don't fancy for one instant that failure is going to keep me here. Did you think, with a weapon like that in my hands, that I'd stand for anything less than a fifty-fifty proposition? Our original plan would have been better—easier, simpler. But I'll have my share out of this, anyway. So, if you do know—"

"Gaby, I don't know. I'll swear that I don't. How could I? But surely you wouldn't—wouldn't attempt—"

"That is for you to say, darling."

Darling, as she said it then, was as wicked a word as I had ever listened to.

"For me to say?"

"Give John to me. I've changed my mind. If you'll do that, I'll stay right here, and settle down, and do an imitation of a moral, model wife that would satisfy even you."

"Gaby, you speak as if John were a

child's toy, to be passed about. I couldn't give him to you, if I were willing to."

"You could, and you know it. You won't. So, that's that. But keep your righteous fingers out of my life; stop your damn preaching, and meddling. I am going to the cabin now. You would better come with me."

"We've searched that cabin a thousand times."

"All the same, it is the one logical place; far removed, and under cover. Too, I must see whether that Indian nailed those floor boards down again, before I pay him."

THE cabin is the one Sam built to live in when he first came to the valley. It is up Boulder Creek, about half a mile from the ranch-house, and, built in a big grove of aspen trees, it is one of the prettiest spots on the place. Sam has kept it in repair, inside and out; owing, I think, to sentimental memories, though he declares it is because he dislikes wreckage on the place. The best fishing on the creek begins just above there; so the men, as a rule, leave their fishing paraphernalia in the cabin's kitchen. That is the only use the place has been put to, since John and Martha were little things, and Sam used to hide their Christmas presents up there, under the shelf in the kitchen.

The shelf, about three feet wide, is built across one end of the kitchen. It served Sam for a table, pantry, and sink. Being a man, he built it right handily, like a chest; so that the entire top of it had to be raised to get to the storage place underneath. There was no secret about it. All anyone had to do, was to move everything off the top of it, and lift the lid. But I had read how the hardest problems for detectives always turned out to be something that had been too simple to notice; so my plan was to go up there and raise the lid.

On my way, I met the girls coming home. I imagined that they looked at me with suspicion. I passed a remark about the sweet-smelling clover hay, and hurried right along.

Half an hour later, when I was expecting instant death at any minute, I thought about that sweet clover smell, and how unappreciative I had been of it, and of the blue sky and fresh air, and of the

green things, lighted yellow with sunshine, and I took a vow that, if I ever did get a chance to enjoy them again, I would spend the remainder of my life in so doing, and in being grateful to the Creator of them. The same as the last time I had a jumping toothache, I thought that, if that tooth ever did stop aching, nothing could ever make me unhappy again; I was going to be peacefully happy, always, for the reason that I did not have a toothache. Human nature, I have since decided, is never happy because of negatives. At least, I have never known anyone who was happy, for long, because he did not have a toothache, or was not in a hospital, or not hungry, or not—which brings me back to my story—shut up in a chest with packages of explosives.

In the cabin, I went at once to the kitchen; and, removing fish-baskets, fly-books and reels from the shelf, lifted it back.

I am sure that I had expected to find it empty. Perhaps I had hoped to find a small iron box containing a treasure, or a jewel-casket, or maybe an aged leather case, containing the missing will, or the plans of some secret fortification—any of the simple, ordinary things generally hunted for and discovered. What I had not expected to find, and what I certainly had never hoped to find, was what was there: any number of neatly wrapped packages, addressed to Mr. Sam Stanley, sent by express, and labeled, variously, "Danger." "Explosives." "Handle with Care."

CHAPTER X

A CONVERSATION

I AM not claiming that I possessed one particle of common sense at that minute, nor for a good many minutes after that. My actions would give the lie, direct, to any such an assertion on my part. It did not take any common sense to know, straight off, that, sent to him or not, Sam was not mixed up in any business that had to do with explosives, bombs, and Bolshevism. It was easy enough to remember, then, that Sam had not been to Rattail for the past ten days; that Hubert Hand had been making the trips down for the mail, expressage, and supplies.

Just as he came into my mind, I heard his voice. It was a startling coincidence; but I need a better excuse than that, for surely no mortal ever did a more foolish thing than I did then. I climbed into that chest, along with those packages, and lowered the lid down over me. If I had any idea, I suppose it must have been a desire not to let him know that I had discovered his secret—his and Gaby's together, undoubtedly—but I can't remember having any thought at all until, just as the lid closed, I remembered the sad poem about the bride and the mistletoe chest.

I thought, then, that her situation was comfortable compared to mine. If you have never been packed in a box with a lot of explosives, as I hope you have not, you can have no notion of what I went through. I could have climbed out. But, if you are an elderly woman, of my size and build, as I hope you are not, and if you have a certain reputation for dignity to live up to, and a certain reputation for snooping to live down, you can have an idea why I didn't come springing out of there, like a jack-in-the-box, or like the immoral ladies who emerge from pies—so the papers say—at bachelor's parties. I weighed the matter carefully, as I heard, through the thin boards, Hubert Hand, talking to someone, come into the kitchen. I chose death by suffocation or combustion.

"My dear woman," were the first words I heard from him, "you may set your mind at rest. I am not going to marry the girl. I am not a marrying man, as you know; and, if I were, she wouldn't have me."

"You leave her alone, then. Understand me. Leave her alone."

If I believed my ears, that was Mrs. Ricker's voice; that was Mrs. Ricker, not only talking, but talking like that to Hubert Hand.

"You flatter me," he said. "Jealous, still, after all these years?"

"I despise you. But you leave that girl alone. If you think I'll stand, silent, and allow you to marry her—"

"Hire a hall. I told you that I wouldn't marry her, and that she wouldn't have me, if I were willing to."

"Wouldn't she, though? Wouldn't she? She is mad about you. She can't look at

you without love in her eyes, nor speak to you without love in her voice. She tries to hide it; but she can't hide it from me."

I am not sure whether I read it, or whether I figured it out for myself; but I do know it is a fact that no woman ever accuses another woman of being in love with a man unless she could imagine being in love with him herself.

"As to that," Hubert Hand said, in that preeny, off-hand manner that men, who will discuss their love affairs at all, use when discussing them, "what possible difference could it make to you, Ollie?"

"Only that I would kill her, and you, too, before I would let her have you."

"Easy on that, my girl. Your last attempt at murder—at least I hope that was your last attempt—was not, you may recall, very successful."

"I would be successful another time."

I clamped my teeth to keep them from chattering. I wished that I had some way as easy for muffling the sound made by the pounding of my heart, which was thudding away as loudly as a butter churn in rapid action. Except for that I kept quiet; very quiet. Surrounded in there by explosives, and out there by people who talked of murder as calmly and as comfortably as if they were discussing moss-roses, very quiet did not seem half quiet enough.

They went into the other room of the cabin and stayed there for a few minutes. I could not hear what they were saying, but I did not budge an inch. After I had heard them passing the window, and was sure that they had left the cabin, I remained, very quiet, in the chest for about five minutes longer before climbing out.

I was progressing toward home, shivering in every bone, and limping, since both my legs had gone to sleep, when Sam, riding his bad tempered bronco named Wishbone, came up behind me and dismounted.

"Corns bad, Mary?" he questioned. "Must be going to have rain."

"Keep water in the ditches. Both my legs are asleep, from the ankles up."

"Upon my soul! First time in history you ever sat still in one place long enough to have that happen. Well, well. 'Do the thing that's nearest.' Want to climb up on Wishbone and have me lead him?"

"When I got to meet death," I told him, "I shan't go on the back of a nasty tempered bronco."

"Speaking of tempers," Sam grinned, "a person would think I had sung your feet to sleep, Mary."

"Considering," I replied, "that everyone on the Desert Moon is, at this minute, in mortal danger of their lives, all your light-hearted jesting seems pretty much out of place."

I told him, then, about the packages of explosives hidden under the shelf. I had not told him about my climbing in with them; so I was in no way prepared for his actions.

He stopped. He dropped Wishbone's bridle. He put both his hands on his stomach and leaned over and burst into uproarious laughter. "Ho-ho-ho!" it rolled out, seeming to fill the entire valley. He leaned to one side; he leaned to the other side, and kept on laughing to deafen the far distant deserts.

"Fireworks," he gasped. "I got them for Martha. Going to surprize her on the Fourth. Sent for them months ago. Hid them up there. Ho-ho-ho! I told you to stop pussy-footing around, Mary. Ho-ho-ho! 'Do not look for wrong and evil, you will find them if you do—'"

With as much dignity as a heavy woman, with both of her legs asleep, could muster, I turned and left him. His words and his actions had certainly given me one decision. From this time on, I would tell Sam Stanley nothing.

CHAPTER XI

THE LETTER

WHEN I got back to the house, John was driving up the road in the sedan. He had been to Rat-tail for supplies and for the mail. He tossed the mailbag out to me, and drove around to the kitchen door to unload.

As a rule the Desert Moon mail is mighty uninteresting, being made up, almost, entirely, of bills and advertising matter. Since the girls had come, a few sleazy, foreign looking letters had livened it up a bit. To a person who has never been farther east than Salt Lake City, a letter from England, or from France, does carry quite a thrill with it. There was a letter for Gaby today, postmarked France.

About a month before this, Gaby had received another letter that was a duplicate

of this one; the same gray paper, the same sprawling handwriting. Instead of taking it indifferently, as she did other letters, and reading it wherever she happened to be, she had snatched it out of my hand and had run off to her room with it. All that evening she had seemed to be preoccupied, and worried. The writing looked like a man's writing; but, like a lot of other things, including cigarette smoke, hip pockets and hair cuts, it is not as easy as it used to be to distinguish between male and female in handwriting, at a distance. Sending only two letters in close to two months, it seemed to me that whoever had written them did not write unless he or she had something of importance to say. I was still puzzling over it, when Gaby came into the room.

Sure enough, she snatched it out of my hands, just as she had done with the other letter, and ran straight upstairs with it.

When John and Danny came in, a few minutes later, I went upstairs. Habit stopped me at Gaby's door for a minute, with my ear to the keyhole. Faintly, sounds don't come plainly through our thick doors, I heard the portable typewriter that she had brought with her when she came to the ranch, click, clicking away.

My first judgment was that she was not losing any time in answering that letter; but, as I went down the hall, I had a hazy notion that there had been something queer, different, about the way she had been using the machine. Instead of snapping away on it, lickety-split, as she usually did, she had been touching the keys slowly and carefully, picking them out one at a time, the way I have to do when I try to use Sam's plaguey machine to copy recipes for my card catalog.

I was tuckered and tired. So, after telephoning some instructions to Belle and Sadie in the kitchen, I took plenty of time to tidy myself up. I dawdled in my bath, and I cut my corns, and rubbed hair tonic into my scalp. But, when on my way downstairs again, I stopped for a second at Gaby's door, the typewriter was still going, with its slow click, click. There was nothing to be made out of it, so I went along. It was fortunate that I did, because, before I had reached the top of the stairway, Gaby's door flung open and she called to me, with something in her voice that made me shake in my shoes.

I turned and looked at her. Her face wore an expression that was not human; an expression that would have made any decent woman do as I did, and turn her eyes quickly away.

"Tell Danny to come up here," she said.

I hurried off downstairs, and delivered the message to Danny who was with John.

"What's the matter, Mary?" John questioned, when Danny had gone upstairs. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I think," I answered, "that I have—the ghost of Sin."

"Doggone that girl," he said. "I wish she were in Jericho."

"Gaby, you mean?"

"You're darn right. She's causing all the trouble around here."

"What trouble?" I asked, as a feeler.

"I don't know—exactly. She keeps Danny miserable. But that isn't it, or not all of it. Don't you seem to feel trouble around here, all the time? I thought everyone did. I do, Gosh knows."

"I know," I said. "I feel it, too. I think Sam does, though he won't altogether admit it. Just the same, John, there isn't a thing we can put our fingers on, is there?"

He walked to the window and looked out at the long range of Garnet Mountains, turning blood-red, now, under the sunset.

"I suppose not," he said, at last. "Sometimes, though, when I see Danny looking as she looked when she went upstairs just now, I feel as if it would be a good thing if somebody would put their fingers around that vixen's throat."

"John," I spoke sharply to him, "don't say things like that. You don't mean it. It is wrong to say it."

I was sure that he did not mean it. I was sure that only the voice of one of his rare ugly moods had spoken, and that the wicked thought had died with the wicked words. But, from that day to this, I have never repeated those words to a living soul.

CHAPTER XII

AN INSIGHT

IN SPITE of all my efforts not to do so, I have, again, run on ahead of the story. But, I declare to goodness, the horror of it, after all these months, is still so strong upon me, that I know the only

way to get that written is to write it, with no more dilly-dally, and then to go back and lead up to it properly with the events that immediately preceded it.

That evening, then, the second of July, the two girls came down, late, together. Danny was paler than usual, and her face had a drawn, hurt look, which she explained by saying that she had a severe headache. Gaby was gayer than gay.

I kept watching her, trying to catch her face in repose, to see if any trace remained of that dreadful expression I had seen in the afternoon. Her face, nor one bit of her, was in repose for a minute from the time she came downstairs until she went upstairs again, after twelve o'clock that night.

She put "La Paloma" on the phonograph, and did a Spanish dance, clicking her heels and snapping her fingers until they sounded like firecrackers. She did an Egyptian dance, slinking about, and contortioning. It wasn't decent. She got the whole crowd, including the girls from the kitchen (who had stayed to gape through the door at her dancing, instead of going home as they should have done), and excluding only Danny, with her headache, Mrs. Ricker and me, to join in a game of follow the leader, and she led them a wild chase all over the house from cellar to attic. Laughing, and jumping, and screaming, and shouting they went, with the radio shrieking out the jazz orchestra in Los Angeles; and me with depression so heavy upon me that it felt real, like indigestion.

Mrs. Ricker was doing some tatting. As I watched her, I decided that, ears or no ears, she was not the woman I had heard talking, that afternoon, up in the cabin. Hubert Hand had said to that woman that she had attempted murder. She could not have been Mrs. Ricker; not our Mrs. Ricker, the thin, silent woman who had lived so decently with us for so long. Those white, bony fingers, darting the shuttle back and forth, making edgings for handkerchiefs, had never held any murderous weapon. Those tight, wrinkled lips had never said, "I would kill her, and you too." John had never said—I shivered. It was fanciful thinking, but it seemed to me that for years the Desert Moon had ridden in our sky, clean and clear, a lucky, fair weather moon, and that now the shadow of the wicked world was slowly creeping

over it, covering it, inch by inch, with the darkness that was to end in its eclipse. Wicked thoughts and wicked words breed wicked actions, and I knew it then as now.

Martha came crying to Mrs. Ricker. "Gaby hurt Chad," she said. "I wish she would die. We could make her a nice funeral."

Mrs. Ricker's fingers darted faster, back and forth.

Danny spoke, from the davenport. "You shouldn't talk like that, Martha, dear. It is wrong."

Her voice sounded as if it ached. She looked, lying in a huddle over there, as miserable as I felt. I was drawn to her. I went and sat beside her.

"Could I do anything for your headache?" I asked. "Get you some aspirin, maybe."

"No, thank you, Mary." There was so much gratitude in her big dark eyes for nothing but common decency on my part, that I felt downright ashamed of myself.

"Danny," I said, straight out, never caring much about mincing words, "I know that something is troubling you. Why don't you tell John, or Sam, or even me about it? Just tell us the truth. We'd all go far to help you, if we could."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Bless your heart, Mary," she said. "Bless all of your hearts. You are all so good, here—"

I was enough annoyed with John, for coming up right then, to have slapped him. I answered his question for Danny.

"There is plenty you could do for her," I said. "You could shut off that screeching radio, for one thing. And you could quiet down, and get the others quieted down. Nobody ever told me that noise like this was a remedy for a splitting headache; did they you?"

"By golliess! It is a wonder you wouldn't have told me before, Mary." Man fashion, putting the blame on me.

Danny wouldn't hear to John's stopping the racket. Everyone was having such a good time. Bed was the place for her. She couldn't hear any noise in her room, with the door shut. And off she went.

I know now that she would not have told me anything that could have helped matters. But I did not know it then, and I was sorely disappointed. For those sudden tears in her eyes, and her voice when she had said, "bless your heart," had con-

vinced me that there was sincerity behind them, and honesty, and good.

In the black days that followed, when all of us were living in the dark shadows of doubts, and confusions, and fears and suspicions, I was thankful, time and again, for those certainties, for that one fleeting but sure insight into Danny's soul.

CHAPTER XIII

THE QUARREL

THE morning of the third was biting hot, with that stinging, piercing heat that we have, when we have heat at all, in this high altitude. The sixty mile trip across the deserts to Telko, on a day like this, would be exactly the same as a sixty mile trip through an oven at the right heat for a roast of beef.

Nevertheless, before seven o'clock that morning, every manjack of a puncher on the place, with all of his trimmings and trappings, including wives, squaws, pa-poooses, children and firearms, had set off in flivvers or on horseback, bound for the celebration, leaving the place hole-empty, as Sam said, when he came into my kitchen with a gallon of cream from the dairy.

He pulled the stool out from under the table, perched on it, and remarked, as cheerfully as if he were reading it off of a tombstone, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

I didn't want him bothering me in the kitchen, when I had everything to do, with Belle, Sadie and Goldie gone gaddin'; but being a woman, normal I hope, I asked him what he meant by that.

"I'm not going to be surprized," he answered, "if we have another visitor, one of these days."

"Nor me either," I said, though much astonished, because it was as if he had read my mind. At that minute I had been worrying about Sadie. She was expecting her baby, before long, and land only knew what such a trip as she was off taking now, and the celebration to boot, might precipitate. "That fool girl," I went on. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit if this was the death of her—not a bit."

"Pshaw!" Sam said. "What have you found out, Mary?"

"She told me herself, the last of July," I replied.

"Yes? I thought all along that she knew."

Since he seemed as sober as an owl, and as serious, I decided that there was no answer to make, and I made none.

"She's off a few weeks, though. I sent a telegram, and got an answer yesterday. It is the Fourth of July."

"Sam," I found breath to retort, "one of us is plumb crazy. I think it is you. Do you think it is me?"

"Not to make any bones about it," Sam said, "I have thought, here lately, that every dang soul on the place was only saved from being in the asylum because of the ignorance of the authorities. But, in this case, I think I am sane and certain. I wired the warden of the penitentiary. He said that Daniel Canneziano was to be released on the morning of the Fourth of July. Gaby told you the last of July? Probably some time off, for good behavior."

"I wasn't talking about Canneziano," I snapped. "And how did I know you were? I was talking about Sadie's baby."

I dropped into a chair, feeling sort of weakened from the news about Canneziano, and waited with what patience I could for Sam to stop laughing.

"You mark my words," I said, when the laugh had gone down to a silly giggle, over which I could make myself heard, "all these queer actions around here have something to do with that man's release."

"I'll bet you," Sam said. "But blame my soul if I know what to do, about anything."

"I know what I'd do about Canneziano, if he shows up here," I told him.

"Yes, I know. But he is Danny's father, and Danny is going to marry John. After all, money is not much good unless you take it to market. If I could come to a decent agreement with the fellow—and if he'd take that Gaby with him. I'm dead certain that her hanging around here isn't going to contribute any to John and Danny's married life—"

"What do you mean by that, Sam?" Gaby asked the question, walking right into the kitchen. I was all taken aback; but Sam didn't seem to be.

"Eavesdroppers, my girl," he said, "hear no good of themselves. I mean that I don't think any girl who wanted to act right would treat her sister's betrothed as you treat John."

"You," she said, very slowly, to make insult baste each word, "are a damned old fool, Sam Stanley."

I shook in my shoes. I had not dreamed that there was a living human being who would dare say that, in that tone of voice, to Sam.

He stood up. He put his hands on her shoulders, gently though, and turned her around.

"You are a bad, wayward girl," he said. "March out of here, now, and get your manners mended before I see you again."

He sobered even her, for a minute. She walked to the door, without another word. There, she whirled around like a crazy thing, and, I declare to goodness, I don't know what she said. It was the sort of talking I had never heard in my life; my ears were not enough accustomed to the words to take in their meanings. But one thing that she kept screaming, screaming so loudly that she could be heard all over the place, was that Sam had threatened her once too often. Sam stood there, paralyzed, I think, as I was, for perhaps a couple of minutes, before he turned and walked off, into the backyard.

Hubert Hand came rushing in. Gaby threw her arms around his neck, and kept on with the screaming and sobbing. Chad came in through the pantry. Mrs. Ricker opened the door that was at the foot of the back stairway.

She stood there, in the doorway, watching Hubert Hand, with both his arms around Gaby, petting and soothing her. She dampened her tight lips with her tongue; but, without saying a word, she went back up the stairs, closing the door behind her. Hubert Hand led Gaby into the dining-room, and through it into the living-room.

"What in God's name happened?" Chad said to me.

I went and washed my face and took a drink of water. "Chad," I said, "Gabrielle Canneziano has lost her mind. She is insane."

His face went white as lard. "I don't believe it."

"Either that," I said, "or else she is the wickedest, the—"

"Stop it," he shouted at me. "You, nor anyone, can talk to me like that about the girl I love."

"Love! Love your foot!" I snapped at

him. The idea of mooning about love to me, at a time like that.

"None of you understand her," he said, "nor try to. She is in some sort of trouble—terrible trouble. Anyone can see that. I'd give my soul to help her—to serve her—"

"If you are so crazy about serving her," I said, "you might go into the dining-room and set the table, and help me serve her, and the rest of you, some breakfast."

He went into the yard. Like a lot of men, I thought, who want to give their souls and so on to women, he didn't care to be bothered with smaller details, such as feeding them.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO DEPARTURES

AFTER dinner, which we didn't have until nearly one o'clock on the Fourth of July, owing to Chad's not getting the ice-cream frozen on time, John surprised us all by saying that he was going to take the sedan and drive down to Rattail for the mail.

I suspicioned, right then, that he was up to something. He could not fool me into thinking that he would take a fifty mile trip—twenty-five miles each way—through the desert heat for no other reason than to get the mail. He couldn't do any trading, since all of Rattail would be off to the Telko celebration. When Danny seemed hurt and troubled about him going, and when he went riding right off, anyway, I decided that Sam must have sent him, expecting some word concerning Canneziano. I was wrong.

We had had a stiff breeze, with a promising sprinkle of rain in the morning; but it had died down about noon and, at two o'clock, it was too tarnation hot to do anything but try to keep cool. I stacked the dinner dishes, to wash in the evening, and joined the others, sitting around in the living-room with the electric fans going full blast.

Sam, chess board in hand, stopped long enough by my chair to say in an undertone, "What did I tell you, Mary? 'It is always darkest, just before the dawn.'"

That piece of optimism from him was due, in part, to the extra good holiday dinner he had just eaten; and in part to a

sense of quiet, edging close to peace, that had pervaded the place since morning. I had noticed it, too, with thankfulness, and had accounted for it with the supposition that Gaby had spent all of her energy in meanness the day before, and was obliged to rest up for a spell.

"That's a nice little piece," I answered Sam. "There is another one, though, isn't there, about a lull before the storm?"

That was not pure contrariness on my part. I was expecting every minute, to see Gaby break out again. She didn't. She yawned around, and fussed about, and then went and sat beside Danny, who was looking at the picture in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and put her arm around her, and petted her up a little—a most unusual performance for her.

When Chad, who had been monkeying with the radio, got a rip-roaring patriotic program from Salt Lake, the two girls went upstairs together.

A few minutes later I had an errand upstairs—a real one, I wouldn't have taken myself up in that heat to satisfy any curiosity—; so, out of habit, I stopped at Gaby's door to listen. I heard the girls giggling in there; and, knowing no great harm is afoot when girls giggle, I went on, got my scrap of pongee silk to mend Sam's shirt, and came downstairs again.

Sam and Hubert Hand were deep in their chess game. Mrs. Ricker was tatting. Chad and Martha were playing dots and crosses. In spite of the noise from the radio, there was a comfortable feeling about the room that made me lonesome for the days we had all had together before the Canneziano girls had come.

The radio program, which was to last from two until four o'clock had just that minute stopped. Martha, who when she didn't forget it, usually fed her rabbits about that time of day, had gone out to do it. Gaby came downstairs, humming a tune.

She had on the tomato soup colored wrap that she had worn on the train, and the hat to match the wrap. She was carrying a beaded bag. She never dressed up like that, to go walking around the place; a wrap, even such a light one, in the heat of that day, was downright ridiculous.

Chad said, "All dressed up and no place to go?"

She tossed her head at him, and hurried

straight down the room and out through the glass doors. Chad followed her. They stopped together on the porch. She stood with her back to me. Chad faced me. In a minute, I saw his mouth bend up into a grin of bliss. Nothing would have surprised me more. For this reason.

As that girl had walked through the room, I had seen that she walked in mortal fear. In spite of her humming, in spite of her attempted swagger, fear was in her widened eyes, in her drawn in chin, in the contraction of her shoulders. Wherever it was that she was going, she was afraid to go. But where could she go? John had the sedan. Except for the trucks, which she couldn't drive, and her pony—she surely would not be dressed like that to ride horseback—there was no way for her to get off the place. It must be, then, that someone was coming to the place, and that she was going out alone to meet them. Who? Canneziano? Not unless Sam had been mistaken about the time when he was to be released from prison. Usually, when people think at all, they think quickly. All this had gone through my mind while she had walked the forty feet to the door. Before Chad smiled, I had spoken to Mrs. Ricker.

"That girl," I said, "is afraid of something."

Mrs. Ricker darted her tatting shuttle back and forth. She moistened her lips, with her tongue; but changed her mind and said nothing.

Gaby and Chad stood on the porch talking for two or three minutes, a very short time, at any rate. Then she went down the steps, and Chad, still smiling, came back into the room.

As he came in, Danny called down from the top of the stairway, "Gaby—Oh, Gaby?"

She knows where Gaby is going, and whom she is going to meet, and she, too, is afraid, I decided, because of the queer, strained quality in her voice.

"Gaby has gone out," I called, in answer. And then, since I could still see Gaby, walking down the path, "Do you want her, Danny? We could fetch her back."

"No," Danny answered. "Don't bother. I'll come down."

I had to reverse my first decision about Danny's being frightened. At least, her

voice was natural enough, now; I fancied, perhaps, a note of relief in it.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes after that, when Martha came running into the house, laughing and dancing with joy, and wearing the gold bracelet with the monkey clasp. Gaby, she said, had given it to her, just now, out by the rabbit hutch.

WHILE we were all still exclaiming over the monkey, and praising it up, to please Martha, Danny came downstairs. She was all freshly dressed, and sweet smelling with the nice, quiet flower scent she used, but she looked really ill. She said her headache was worse again, and she drew the curtains at the windows beside the big davenport, to ease the glare of the light, before she curled up on it.

I thought it was a good time to continue the conversation we had begun the other evening.

"Danny," I began, as I sat down beside her, "if you just could tell John, or Sam, or me what is troubling you, I am pretty sure that we could find some way out."

"Bless your hearts," she repeated. "You are all too good. I am afraid I can't tell you what has been troubling me. But I can tell you, honestly, that I think now the worst of the troubles are over. They never were really mine, you see; they were Gaby's. And now Gaby has decided to—well, stop being troubled."

"We had a long, good talk this afternoon. She has made me some promises. She is going to try to act differently, to be good—as she used to say when we were little. She had a dreadful disappointment day before yesterday. It made her act very badly—at first. She has decided now to make the best of it, for there is a best of it to make. You've noticed how much better she acted last evening, and all of today? She is making a fresh start. You see, she has even given Martha her precious monkey. I am sure we shall all be much happier, from now on."

"Do you know where she was going this afternoon?" I asked.

"For a little walk?"

"Why did she wear her wrap, and carry her beaded bag, just to go out for a little walk?"

Danny sat up straight, pressing her

hands to her aching head. "Her wrap—today? Her beaded bag? Surely not."

"That's just what she did. Didn't you see her before she left?"

"I was lying down. She came to my door and said that she was going for a walk, and asked me if I cared to go with her. I said that my headache was too severe. She went into her room, and from there downstairs. I felt guilty about refusing to go with her, after our talk. I thought that I should; so I called after her. But, when you said she had gone, I was afraid she would be annoyed at being called back. I had gotten up; so, since John will surely be home before long, now, I came down. I can't understand her wearing a wrap. It is so silly, on a day like this."

It sounded all right, but I was not quite satisfied.

"I thought," I said, "that, when you called after her, you were frightened, or worried, or—something."

"Frightened? No, Mary, I had nothing to be frightened about."

"Gaby was frightened," I said.

"Gaby! Oh, no, Mary. She couldn't have been. She was all right this afternoon. Nothing could have happened since then."

"I don't know. Something was the matter with her when she walked through this room. I'll go bond, that, wherever it was she was going, she was afraid to go."

"Mary, it must be that you are imagining this. Unless— Oh, it couldn't be that Gaby has not told me the truth about—about anything. I am sure she was honest with me this afternoon. I am sure—and yet— Oh, dear me, I wonder where she went for her walk?"

"She talked to Chad, just before she left. Maybe she told him where she was going."

Danny called the question across the room to Chad, who was improvising, cheerful, happy music, on the piano.

"Not a word," Chad spoke above his music, "except that she was going for a walk and didn't want my company."

"Gaby told me," Martha piped up, from where she was sitting on the arm of Sam's chair, "that she was going to the cabin. She was in a big hurry. She ran."

"Up toward the cabin?" Danny questioned, though we all knew we could not

put a mite of trust in anything Martha said.

"Yes. Chad loves me better'n he loves her. Don't you Chad?"

"You are positive," Danny insisted, and I couldn't see why, for a minute, "that she went to the cabin, or towards it? You aren't fibbing, are you, Martha dear? Are you sure that she didn't go around the house toward the road?"

When she asked about the road, her meaning was clear to me. Danny was afraid that Gaby had gone to meet John, who should have been back from Rattail before this. But, if she had hoped to get anything out of Martha, she had made a mistake in her questioning. For anyone to accuse Martha of a fib, was to make her stick to it like a waffle to an ungreased pan.

"She told me she was going to the cabin," Martha answered. "She ran. She was in a hurry."

Danny stood up. "I think I shall walk up to the cabin and see whether I can find her. You'll come with me, Mary?"

I said not in the heat. Besides, it would soon be five o'clock, and time to be starting supper. She asked Mrs. Ricker to go with her. Mrs. Ricker refused. I wondered why, when neither of us would go, Danny did not go by herself. She did not. Had she, perhaps, guessed at the cause of Gaby's fear? Did she share it? Was she afraid to go to the cabin alone?

CHAPTER XV

ONE RETURN

AT FIVE o'clock the men put up the chess board, Chad stopped playing the piano, and the three of them went down to the barns together.

I went into the kitchen to get supper. Danny, in spite of her headache, insisted upon helping me. She did the best she could. She managed to get the table set, in between times when she was not running to the window to see whether John was coming.

At six o'clock, though neither John nor Gaby had returned, we sat down to supper. Danny was too nervous to touch a bit of food. She kept looking out of the windows, and at her watch, and out of the windows again.

"Don't worry, Danny," Sam said. "John has had tire trouble, on account of the heat. They'll come riding up the road any minute now."

"They?" she questioned.

"Gaby toggled up and went down the road to meet John, didn't she?"

"No," Danny's voice curled into a wail. "No, Uncle Sam, she didn't. Martha saw her going to the cabin. Didn't you, Martha?"

"Martha," Mrs. Ricker astonished us all by saying, "doesn't know where Gaby went. She knows only where Gaby told her she was going."

"But why should Gaby tell her a fib about it?" Danny asked.

"And why," I questioned, "should Gaby go around the house to get to the road, instead of going right out the front way?"

Again Mrs. Ricker shocked us by speaking. "She would not go out the front way, if she wanted to keep her trip to the road a secret."

"Mrs. Ricker," Danny's voice trembled, "at what are you hinting? What is it that you know?"

"I know," said Mrs. Ricker, "that there is not a man living who is not as false as sin."

Sam growled, "Come down to facts, Mrs. Ricker, if you have any."

I think it was the first time Sam had ever spoken unpleasantly to her. He betrayed his own anxiety by so doing. It was easy to see that she was cut to the quick.

"I have no facts," she said, "except, that right after dinner today John and Gaby had a private conversation, and he decided, very suddenly, to go for the mail."

At that minute we heard a sound for sore ears—the car coming up the driveway. Danny jumped up and ran to look out of the living-room window. "He has gone all the way around to the kitchen," she said, when she came back. If it had not been sort of pathetic, showing how worried she had been, her impatience at having to wait another instant or so to see him, would have been funny.

She ran into the kitchen. She and John came to the door of the butler's pantry. John was gray with dust. His brows were knitted, as they are whenever he is troubled about anything.

"He hasn't seen Gaby," Danny an-

nounced, with an exultation that showed plainly what she had been most anxious about. "He brought up the rock-salt. That's why he drove to the kitchen. Come and see, Mary?"

"I'd rather see you two come and eat your suppers," I said.

"Goodnight!" John answered. "I've got to go and get rid of a few tons of dirt before I can come to the table."

"No," Danny insisted. "Never mind the dirt, dear. Supper is all cold now. Please come and eat."

John patted her on the shoulder and smiled at her, and, manlike, did as he pleased. He went through the kitchen and upstairs the back way. Danny called after him, asking him to hurry. He didn't.

When he finally did come down, all slicked up, and bathed and shaved, he said it was too hot to eat, and would have nothing but some ice-cream.

Sam asked him what had kept him so long, on the trip. John said tire trouble; and that he had met Leo Saule, two miles this side of Rattail, with his flivver broken down. John had stopped to help him, and, at last, had been forced to tow him the six miles north to his place.

John has a way, when he is worried, of shutting and opening his eyes, and of tossing his head back and to the side with a quick little jerk, as if he were trying to get shed of something that was in it. All the while he was eating and talking, he kept doing this. I asked him whether his head ached.

"No," he said. "But I think I'm sort of loco from being out in the sun."

"Gaby kept you waiting quite a while?" Hubert Hand stated and asked.

"What do you mean?" John questioned.

"Waited for her down the road, didn't you, and took her to Rattail in time to catch the train for Reno, or 'Frisco?"

I thought John would fly into a temper. He has a handy temper. But he only looked around at all of us, with a bewildered expression, and "Say, are you fellows trying to put something over on me, or what?" he asked.

"Then you don't deny—" Hubert Hand began. Sam, who has enough dander for both John and himself, when necessary, broke in.

"John doesn't have to deny anything. Marcus will be in the office now, waiting

for twenty-one. 'Phone down. 'Phone's handy. Ask him whether he flagged twenty, today, for a passenger, or whether he is going to flag twenty-one."

Hubert went straight to the telephone. From his end of the conversation, we could tell that twenty had not stopped, and that no one was waiting for twenty-one. He looked foolish, when he turned from the telephone, and said, "Take it all back, John. My mistake."

Sam looked mighty serious. "Well," he drawled, "I don't know but what as good a plan as any would be for us all to go out and have a look around for her—"

"Oh!" Danny exclaimed, sharply. "Uncle Sam, do you think that she has met with some mishap?"

"I think," Sam said, "that she has met with another machine and ridden off in it. But, better safe than sorry; then we'll be fine and fit for the fireworks. Eh, Martha?"

Martha, who had been drowsy all during supper, was half asleep on the davenport, and did not answer.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MURDER

SAM'S first plan, after he and Hubert had made a quick ride to the cabin and back with no sight of Gaby, was for the two of us to go down the road in the sedan. Fortunately, he decided to have John come with us to drive, so that he could use his own eyes, Sam said, for other purposes. Danny came with us. Chad and Hubert Hand were to scout around the place on their ponies. Mrs. Ricker stayed at home with Martha.

As soon as we had started, Sam said, in a cocksure, over-bearing way he never has except when he is not as certain of himself as he'd like to be, "We'll not have to go far. Not more than a mile, I reckon, to find the fresh tire tracks of the machine that came up here to meet her. After the breeze and the shower this morning, the fresh tracks will show up like mud on a new fence. Whoa! What did I tell you? See there."

Tire tracks, sure enough; but they were the tracks made by the sedan, patterned like a snake's back, and showing, plain as print, on top of the dim tracks made by the outfit's departure for Telko the morn-

ing before. We rode along, watching the four long trails; two for John's trip to town, and two for his trip back to the ranch. The only breaks were the spots where, as it was plain to be seen, John had twice had tire trouble.

Our road—and it is that, since Sam had it graded himself, and pays for having it kept up—runs north, straight as a string, with Sam's fields and fences on one side of it, and sagebrush covered deserts on the other side of it, for ten miles to where it joins the Victory Highway. Sam has a sign at the junction with the highway; so no one has any reason for using this road unless he has business with the Desert Moon Ranch.

We drove to the highway before we turned around. We had come back about a mile, when the wind, that always ushers in a storm in these parts, came howling up, blowing the sand and dust in thick clouds, jerking and snapping the sage and the greasewood, chasing and bouncing the tumbleweed balls. The sky turned black. The thunder growled, mean as a threat, in the distance.

John drove fast; but we barely made the ranch before the storm broke. When we came out of the garage doors, the first drops of rain, big as butter cookies, had begun to fall; and, just as we reached the front porch, the rain came pouring down as if all the sky were the nozzle of a big faucet and someone had turned it on, full force.

"This will bring her in," Sam said, as we ran up the steps. "She'll be there, high and dry, when we get in."

She was not. Chad and Hubert Hand had come in, and they acted as if, since we had set out to get news of Gaby, it was a wonder we had not done it. Martha was awake, and sobbing because she could not have the fireworks.

Mrs. Ricker was showing a little last minute sense by hurrying around and getting the house closed against the storm. She should have done it when the wind first came up.

Sam went and touched a match to the fire, ready to be started, in the fireplace. I ran upstairs and closed the bedroom windows, and turned the fans off. I don't care for buzzing fans during one of our electrical storms. I had come downstairs, ready to take my rest, when I remembered

the attic, with all of its windows wide to the drenching rain.

My corns had been hurting me all day; so, Chad being handy, I asked him to go and close the attic. He went up the stairs, and almost at once came back to the head of them to call down that the attic door was locked.

One of my principles is, that if you ask a man to do anything about the house for you, you do it twice yourself. I thought, again, how true that was, as I went on my aching feet up the stairs to prove to him that the door was not locked, never had been locked, and, likely, never would be.

It was locked. Chad stood by, pleased as Punch, when it would not give to my shaking and pulling. He walked off, saying that he would see whether someone downstairs had locked it and had the key, or, if not, whether he could find another key to fit it.

I stood there waiting. I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief. There was a key. It fitted the lock. I opened the door.

About half way up the steps, Gaby was lying in a huddle of pink wrap. Her hat had fallen off. I thought that she was asleep. I spoke to her. She did not an-

swer. I ran up the steps and put an arm around her, trying to lift her. Her head rolled to one side. I saw her throat. It was saffron color, with great blue black bruises at its base. I touched her swollen face. It was cold.

For an instant, my only sensation was one of violent nausea. I tried to scream. My throat had closed. I must have shut my eyes, for I remember thinking that, if I did not open them, the dizziness would sweep me off into unconsciousness. I opened them. I saw, there on the red carpet of the steps, something that shocked my reeling senses into sanity. Dropped all over the bright beaded bag, lying there, were the burned tobacco and the ashes from Sam's pipe.

All of my horror concentrated into a frantic desire to get those ashes cleared away so that no one else could see them. I shook them from the bag to the carpet. I brushed them from the carpet into my handkerchief. Just as I got to my feet from my knees, Chad came up.

"Call the others," I said. "Gaby is here—murdered."

I stuffed the handkerchief filled with ashes into my pocket, and, for the first time in my life, I fainted dead away.

In the following chapters the mystery of the murder is intensified and in turn, nearly every character comes under suspicion.



*And Now for
Some Real Humor*

WEST *goes* SOUTH

By THOMAS THURSDAY

LISTEN, my children, and you shall hear what every showman should know: Never count your pickin's before they're snatched!

Speaking of kumquats, as they do in Florida, you should of seen the beautiful bust in the pan that Shorthorn Shannon and his playmates delivered to Calithumpian Sweeney and his Rio Del Rancho land scheme. In case your pet radio station has carelessly failed to give you a full report, kindly adjust the headphones and I'll broadcast the fiasco myself. To begin with, Sweeney had a yard of nerve to an inch of reason and, as the monkey remarked to the banyan tree, thereby hangs a tail!

"Doc," says he to me, while we lounged on the veranda of one of Miami's misleading hotels, "this land boom makes show business look like a perpendicular pretzel. I admit that I'm a big time guy, and I belong to this Sand Rush like the Bearded Lady belongs outside of barber shops. Now—er—how much jack do you happen to have?"

"I happen to have about five hundred bucks, and I'll see that I happen to have it for some time to come. Ask me another."

"I wish you'd forget, for the moment, that you're a cheap circus and carnival grifter, and listen to me. We're in line for some important money, and I don't mean I just think so."

"Seeing that I ain't got anything else to do, I'm still listening," I says.

"Atta lad!" he exhorts. "Now listen. You got five hundred. Good! Just add that to my wad and we'll have quite a bank-roll, all of which will be enough to start a very nifty and novel sub-division."

"Pardon you," I says, "but I'm afraid I wasn't listening when you mentioned how much *you* had."

"And here's the big idea," he goes on, ignoring my well-bred question.

"It ain't big enough to get any of my dough," I says. "Right now there's so many new sub-divisions in Florida that a adding-machine would get over-heated trying to count 'em. Les' stick to show business."

"Doc," he retorts, "you give me a pain in the rear-housing. You don't know the difference between the feller on top and the guy on bottom. The lad on top is the one who took a chance and the gil on the bottom just watched 'im take it."

Meantime, I have a scheme that will make Jack Rockefeller and Hank Ford collapse from pure envy. Listen, sap, while I give you the scenario."

For the next fifteen minutes, he told me the latest in bedtime stories. Get a load of this: For three hundred dollars, Sweeney claims he can get an option on twenty acres, seven miles north of Miami, right on the main road. He will stake this off in small lots, and peddling it by mail will be a cinch.

"Just a moment," I interrupts, "how do we sell this mess, and who can we wish it on? From the looks of things right now, I have an idea that My Country 'Tis of Thee has already been milked dry of suckers."

"I've got that all figured out," he smiles. "The other promoters have been appealing to retired grocers, bankers, shoe merchants, lawyers, doctors, bakers, and lads of that ilk. One outfit on the West Coast is angling for ballplayers."

"Well, who do we shake down?"

"Cowboys!" he ejaculates. "Why, when I think how them poor cow gents and ranchers freeze to death in the Northwest every winter I could almost cry. That being the case, we invite them down to enjoy the Florida sunshine and assorted climate."

"Yeah," I says, "but will they bite without seeing what sort of land they're biting on?"

He shivers.

"See the land!" he snaps. "Do I look stupid? Doc, if they should get one slant at our trap they'd shoot up the whole peninsula. I'll take you out and show you what it looks like."

We leap into our Puddle Jumper, and twenty minutes later, Sweeney comes to a halt.

"Before you," he beams, "is beautiful Rio Del Rancho—the Cowboy's Riviera. A hotsy and totsy deadfall, hey?"

"Fine!" I admits. "What is it?"

"Use your imagination," he grins. "When I write up my booklet, Rio Del Rancho will make the French and Wop Riviervas look like diphtheria."

"You may have plenty of land here," I admits, "but I bet I could toss out a line and catch slews of catfish."

"Not catfish," he corrects. "Bass. But if need be, we could drain this off, via

canals, same as they did around Okeechobee. However, that would take plenty of pennies, and mamma never reared no foolish children."

"Won't it dry up?" I asks.

"Well, this is the rainy season, but when winter comes you'll hardly notice any water at all."

"Just about enough to fill Lake Erie, huh?" I remarks.

"Be good," he says. "We're gonna sell this land by mail, ain't we? And anybody who buys land by mail deserves all they get—including the water. Meanwhile, our present business is to promote Rio Del Rancho—the Cowboy's Riviera. Les' go!"

All aboard for Griestown!

II

DURING the next few weeks Calthumpian Sweeney was as busy as the word itself. After getting the option on the twenty acres of moisture, he hired a flock of carpenters to erect a field-office—knowing that no sub-division would be genuine without one.

"Brother," says the boss nail-and-hammer expert, "what you want is a houseboat. You better sink a few caissons or your joint will float away."

"Omit the wit and humor," says Sweeney. "I admit it's a little damp, but slip on your boots and get busy. I would like to have that field office erected by tomorrow night, so's I can send photographs of it to our prospective clients."

"Who you goin' sell this to," demands the carpenter, "ducks?"

"I'm paying you to work, not wise crack," snorts Sweeney.

"See that you do, brother. The last guy who tried to gyp me became a treat for the undertaker."

Well, to dwarf a tall story, when the field-office was erected, Sweeney had it painted in real showmanship colors, meaning bright orange with vermilion borders. In short, a circus wagon. On top, he has a large sign, reading RIO DEL RANCHO, and underneath *The Cowboy's Riviera*. Next, he has a bevy of stick-in-the-ground signs painted, and scatters 'em along the highway. Here's just a few of 'em: WATER? YES! — LIGHTS? YES! — ELECTRICITY? YES! — FREE TAXES FOR TWO YEARS AT RIO DEL

RANCHO!—NEW HOTEL AVOCADO TO BE ERECTED SOON!—WHY FREEZE IN THE NORTH? SWIM IN THE SOUTH!—MOTHER EARTH IS THE BEST ONE HUNDRED PER CENT BET!—WATCH RIO DEL RANCHO GROW!—BUY FOR HOME OR SPECULATION. YOU CAN'T LOSE EITHER WAY!

After we got the signs planted, Sweeney has a photographer to take snaps of 'em, and then spends two days writing up his booklet. Speaking of booklets, Sweeney used to be a press-agent for a small mud-show, and when it came to concocting fairy tales he had Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm Brothers resembling pikers. On the first page, he has a photo of no less than himself, encased in full cowboy regalia, hair-pants and all. He's also wearing a ten-gallon lid that fits him the same way a baby's B. V. D.'s wouldst fit an elephant. Beneath the tasty chromo is this caption: *Cactus Sweeney—Cowboy Realtor and Developer of Rio Del Rancho*. The rest of the booklet is devoted to just how out beautiful swamp came into being, although he carelessly forgot to mention the swamp part. According to Mr. Sweeney's own statement—and he wouldn't fool anybody, except himself—he had spent thirty-odd years in the bleak and frozen Northwest, such as Montana, Colorado, Oregon, and the two Dakotas. He sweated in the summer, and during the winters he'd freeze his ears off, and collect double-pneumonia, triple-chilblains, or what have you. One day Cactus Sweeney received a letter from a former pal, down in sunny Florida. The pal invites Cactus to visit him, and Sweeney buys a ticket and goes down. After he had been in Florida less than a month his rheumatism disappeared like swiss cheese at a convention of rodents. So Cactus went back home, sold out his ranch—which he had worked for twenty years, in the booklet—and decides to make Florida his permanent home. Of course, he had many more pages of sauce from the apple, such as how easy it would be to own a lot in his new development, etc., etc., and boloney.

"A appetizing dish, hey?" he remarks. "Once more I'm obliged to admit I'm clever."

"You're too good for this world," I says. "When you kick in they'll declare a divi-

dend in Heaven. By the way, where was your ranch—New Jersey?"

"Connecticut," he corrects.

"What did you raise—hell or potatoes?"

"Chickens," he replies. "That's why I left. They crowed too early, and besides that little inconvenience, the sheriff foreclosed the mortgage."

"Tough," I concedes. "As to this little story you've written, it's good fiction, although the plot ain't so snappy. All the same, Big Boy, I don't think them cow lads will nibble at the bait."

"Don't bet against it," he says. "Florida is in the air today, and before the boom flops, some wise guy will buy the Gulf Stream and six acres in Biscayne Bay."

"We might get a first payment on this stuff, but how about the balance?" I want to know.

"Balance—hell!" he snorts. "The first payment will net us about one thousand per cent profit. After that, I don't care if school keeps or not."

"Suppose some of them six-gun toters decide to come down and get a eagle-eye view of their investment? If they get one peek at this aquarium, they'll sling assorted lariats around our necks."

"Forget it," he says. "If I wanted 'em to see the property, I'd ask 'em to call, and not peddle it via mail. And never mind about cowboys shooting us up, or even down. Nowadays, they do all their shooting in the movies and magazines."

"We'll see," I says, and we did.

III

A WEEK later Sweeney has the mails clogged with five hundred booklets, addressed to Wyoming, Colorado, and all points northwest. Along with the booklet, he enclosed a typewritten form-letter, smeared with some extra banana lubricant, and telling the boys to get in on the ground floor, and to do it now. For one hundred berries, any cowboy or ranchman could grab off a morsel of Rio Del Rancho, and live happy ever after. The price, according to Sweeney, was a dead steal, and the only reason he was letting the lots go so cheap was because he sincerely wanted his fellow cow-punchers to share in his success. No fooling, Cactus Sweeney had a big heart—about the size of one-half of a split oat.

"Some letter, hey?" he gloats. "Within the next few weeks we ought to get a whole flock of checks."

"Maybe so," I says. "Maybe so."

"There's no 'maybe so' about it," he admits. "This whole Florida boom was put over by showmen, and ain't I a showman?"

"Maybe so," I says. "Maybe so."

"Aw, shut up!" he snaps. "You ain't got any more back-bone than an angle-worm. Here I let you in on a racket that should net us at least twenty grand, and you moan around like a giraffe with a two-inch neck. What's eating you? This here development of ours is just about as legitimate as most of the others, and I don't mean maybe! Besides, it's all good muck soil, and is great for raising almost anything. Quit beefing, kid—you'll lose your complexion."

"I ain't worrying about my complexion," I says, "I'm worrying about losing my neck."

"Very fine soil," he repeats. "I should of played that up in the booklet. Why, I bet you could plant a rusty flivver and come back three months later and find a Rolls-Joyce in blossom."

Well, to come to the end of a perfect fray, I'll say that those darn fool cowboys began to shower us with hundred-buck checks. By the end of the first month we got more than five thou in the bank, and I begin to apologize to Sweeney for my lack of faith.

"Business," remarks Sweeney, as he nonchalantly opens a fresh batch of mail, "is what might be called good. It wouldn't surprise me, Doc, if we cleaned up about fifty grand. Pat me on the back, Big Boy; pat me on the back."

"If we don't watch out," I says, "somebody might come around and pat you on the head. If you ask me, this is too good to be true."

"Stick with me, kid, and you'll wear silk suits."

"With stripes," I adds.

Two weeks later we have cornered another supply of loot, and it goes to Sweeney's head like a squirrel toward a nut, and the way he begins to swagger around is positively disgusting.

"I need a stenographer," he moans one day, chin-deep in mail. "I ain't used to typewriting; all I know is the select and

slam system. Run a ad' in the paper, Doc, and get me some sweet lady for about twenty berries per week."

When I placed the ad' I thought we'd be swamped with applicants, but we had to run it three days before we got a reply. At that time, Florida was loaded with business (some of which it wouldst like to have now!) and help of any kind was as scarce as side-show fire-eaters with celluloid teeth. We was about to give up hope of employing a fair assistant, when the Miami-Fort Pierce bus stops in front of our trap and a neat little gal hops off. I won't try and describe this eye-widener, because any guy who attempts to describe a beautiful lady is crazy. It can't be done in print, what I mean!

"My name is Sally Smith," she says quietly, tripping into the office, "and I called in reference to your advertisement for a stenographer."

"Okay," beams Sweeney. "Toss your lid onto the rack and wade into this pile of toil. The salary to start will be twenty a week, and the same to finish."

"That," she says, "will be lovely."

"Atta girl!" enthuses Sweeney. "I won't expect you to do any heavy thinking; just take my dictation, and box this typewriter snappy and often."

"I'm fair at the machine," says Miss Smith, "but I must confess that my shorthand is not of the best."

"My shorthand is a little short, too," beams Sweeney. "Grab them envelopes and scatter the addresses over 'em. I think we'll get along fine."

"I'm sure we shall," smiles Sally Smith.

Not wishing to keep you in suspense, I'll confess now that when we employed Sally we treated ourselves to another load of grief!

Meanwhile, business is going along like a shark in a nest of sardines. Pretty soon we had collected about fifteen grand, or in English, fifteen thousand dollars.

"Once again, Doc," says Sweeney, "I admit I'm good; very good. Believe me, this boom is a showman's paradise, and I don't mean I just guess so!"

"Put on the brakes, fellow," I says. "I have a hunch we'll start to skid soon. If some of those cow secretaries should happen to get a slant at their property I'll bet a pair of hair-pants against a queen's neck-lace that they shoot us in the sit-spot."

"Not a chance, Doc; not a chance. I admit we got a few inquisitive notes from the boys, but you know how easy I pacified 'em, don't you?"

The very next day we received a letter from Mr. Shorthorn Shannon, habitat, Death Canyon, Wyoming, and it was very annoying. Shorthorn was one of the first lads to bite on our bait, and we had almost forgot 'im. His lot was in the dead center of the development, and was damp enough for a whale to raise her family in.

"I'll settle this boy promptly!" says Sweeney, after reading the message.

"What does he want—his money back?" I enquires.

"Nothing so unthinkable," he replies. "He has just taken it into what passes for his head that he will come down and pay us a friendly visit. Not so good!"

He dictates the following telegram to Sally Smith:

Shorthorn Shannon,
Death Canyon, Wy.

Advise against coming. Florida in grip of smallpox.

Cactus Sweeney,
Developer, Rio Del Rancho.

"Shoot that right off, girlie," says Sweeney. "Maybe he can comb that out of his whiskers!"

Promptly the following morning we receive Shorthorn Shannon's jovial reply. Take a peek:

Cactus Sweeney,
%Rio Del Rancho,
Florida.

Don't care if it's mumps and measles. On my way.

Shorthorn Shannon.

"The dizzy boob!" whoops Sweeney. "I'd like to see the shape of his head!"

"And he'd like to see the shape of his property," I adds.

"Let 'im come! I'll kid the spurs off 'im, and send him back laughing. You know me, Doc!"

While we're waiting for Shorthorn to arrive, another assortment of trouble rolls in. The following afternoon, a hawk-nosed gent alights from the bus, and with a face as stern as New England's rock-bound coast, flatfoots into our office. He's got an eye as sharp as a whole family of eagles, and he didn't prove to be any Santa Claus to us!

"My name is John Carter," he snaps out. "Inspector, U. S. Post Office, Washington, D. C."

"From Washington, hey?" says Sweeney, not knowing what it was all about. "Greetings! How's Coolidge?"

"I called to investigate your project," goes on Mons. Carter, paying less than no attention to the brilliant Sweeney. "I understand that your development is not exactly as represented in the mails."

"Who's selling anything to the mails?" demands the dumb Sweeney. "I ain't swiped any stamps, have I?"

"Your literature says nothing about the actual condition of the property," continues the government lad. "How do you expect your clients to build homes in a semi-swamp?"

"What d'yer mean—swamp?" yelps my playmate, innocently. "It may be a little moist, but this is the rainy season and the whole state is a bit damp just now."

"Ha, ha," I laughs, trying to remove the tension. "You know how it is, brother."

"Perfectly," says the agent. "Do you intend to drain this land or don't you?"

This is a terrible slap in the face, and what's more, we know it! If we're compelled to drain it, bye-by bank-roll!

"Drain it?" gloops Sweeney. "Why, of course! Do we look like a coupla gyps?"

"Just when will you start the drainage?" fires back the cold-brained boy from Washington. "Besides, I failed to see any reference to drainage in your booklet."

At that, Sweeney shifts his temper into high and steps on the gas.

"Listen to me, wise guy!" he barks, tossing diplomacy to the winds. "We'll drain this drum when we get damn good and ready, see if you can get a giggle outa that! The idea! You walk in on us and all but hint that we're a gang of burglars! Maybe we didn't tell about the—er—dampness in the litterchure, but we thought the customers would have brains enough to know that we'd drain the works. Anyway, we're selling the lots so cheap that it should be called philanthropy."

"I repeat—when do you intend to start draining?" cooes John Carter.

"Give us a chance, can't you?" begs Sweeney, calming down considerable. "Rome wasn't built in a day, was it?"

"If Rome was as wet as this, I fail to see how it *could* be. Meanwhile, gentlemen,

I'll give you one week in which to start draining. Good afternoon."

A breezy customer, huh?

"Well," I says, when the gent blew out, "how can we untangle that beard?"

"I ain't sucker enough to try!" he retorts. "We'll just stall him off as long as possible, then let him do the draining himself. He thinks he's the whole works, but I'll show him that he ain't even the whistle on the works."

S OON after we begin to receive very annoying letters from some of our clients from the Northwest. One lad writes that he has heard it rumored that our development ain't exactly high, wide and handsome. Another corral-addict shoots in a special-delivery to the effect that, if our trap ain't on the level, he'll take pleasure in coming down and try his aim in our direction.

"Aw, let 'em rave!" snaps Sweeney.

"Listen, smart boy," I says politely, "les' get down to business. If you ask me, somebody has tipped these customers off on our deal, and I bet it's our little friend, John Carter. If we don't be careful, that feller will be poison to us."

"Stop moaning, you grifter," he snorts. "I been in worse jams than this, and if I can't guess my way out of this mess I'll rent me a space in a mausoleum and retire from life."

"Maybe so," I says. "But how about this gent, Shorthorn Shannon, who's due to look-in on us at any moment?"

"Forget 'im! I'll take that boy like Barnum took the public. Wait and see!"

Late that night it began to rain, and when it rains in Florida, each drop is as big as a lake. It kept up all night, the whole of next day, and when it made arrangements to halt, Rio Del Rancho resembles one of the finest natural harbors in the world!

"We made a mistake in our selection of buyers," I remarks, as I wade into the field-office. "We should have appealed to sailors, instead of cowboys. We got enough water here to hold a regatta of racing motor boats."

"Never mind the cluck comedy," he growls. "I admit that this moisture ain't helping us any, but—"

A weird looking flivver stops in front of our office, the engine pounding like a

blacksmith on his anvil. The wreck is covered with the mud of at least ten states, while the spoke wheels were so smeared that they appeared like solid discs. In the drivers seat is a bronzed, wiry chap, looking as sober as a drink of grapejuice. He stretches, yawns, gives our lake region the once over, then hops out and splashes into the office.

"Howdy, folks!" he greets. "My name is Shorthorn Shannon, and I'm shore glad to meet up with you hombres."

He didn't smile, and I get the idea that he ain't as sincerely charmed to meet us as he says. Sweeney comes to life, and starts to do his stuff.

"Well, well, well!" he enthuses, grabbing Shorthorn's hand and pumping it snappy and often. "So this is Mr. Shorthorn Shannon, hey? Well, we're mighty glad you called!"

Lik'ell we were!

"Thanks, pardner," says Shorthorn. "Been storming around here lately?"

"I'll tell the cock-eyed world!" confesses Sweeney. "You see Rio Del Rancho is a little low, and when it rains it gets a bit damp. Ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoes Shorthorn. "Er, whar did you say my lot was?"

All of which was a very sad question. Mr. Shannon's lot was in the dead center of the property, and I'll bet a kumquat against Hank Fords roll that a dreadnaught could of floated there.

"Well, brother," says Sweeney, "due to the terrible storm we had the other day your lot is a bit submerged. But don't let that worry you none; when the sun comes out for a day or so it will dry right up."

"Oh, that's all right," says Shorthorn, greatly to our relief. "Les' see now; I paid you fellows one hundred dollars down, as a first payment, didn't I?"

"Correct," admits Sweeney. "And your second payment ain't due—"

"I ain't worrying none 'bout that, pardners," he replies. "I aim to pay up for the other four hundred and own the lot outright. I happen to have the cash along with me, and if you hombres will just make out a bill of sale I'll shore appreciate it."

Well, you could have knocked me over with a toothpick! Will wonders never cease? Here we been expecting this clown to let out a yelp and howl for his money

back, but he comes right in and begs us to let him pay the balance. A boob is a terrible thing, hey?

"Er, what's the idea?" demands the dazed Sweeney. "You got a whole year to pay up."

"I know that, pardner, but I shore hate to buy anything on the installment plan. I bought a pianner for my kid sister, onct, and just as she begin to learn how to play, I went plum broke, and they took it back. Anyway, I'm downright tickled at my lot."

Sweeney and me exchanges glances. Sweeney's look says, "A natural born nut!" and my look says, "Maybe so. Maybe so!"

"Very well, Mr. Shannon," says Sweeney; "if you wish to pay up, that's your affair. But we didn't want any of our clients to pay up until we had drained the property. We're gonna dig canals, and some spots, like yours, may have to be filled in a little."

"You gointa drain my lot?" demands Shorthorn, a bit crestfallen.

"Certainly!" replies Sweeney. "Why?"

Shorthorn removes his sombrero, and scratches his sandy head.

"I'd ruther you don't touch my lot," he says. "I allus wanted some property with water around it, and this just suits me. Please don't drain it, pardner." He replaces his hat on his head, and walks toward the door. "Wal, s'long, hombres—I'm gointa take a pike at Miami. See you later."

"How do you figure that out?" I asks, when Shorthorn had left.

"Must be a dream," says Sweeney. "Here's a guy who's not only satisfied with his purchase, but pays up in full, and don't even want us to drain it! Somebody's crazy!"

But it wasn't Shorthorn Shannon.

IV

WE DIDN'T hear any more from Mr. Shannon for a week or so, but we got plenty of action from the customers, and John Carter, the government lad. As to the clients, they write in that they have seen some tasty snapshots of our development, and they wanted to know if it was in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico or just a large swimming hole. One enraged cow-banger coyly remarks that, if we don't do some speedy explaining, he'll come down and give us a reproduction of

"Custer's last stand," using us as the enemy. Speaking of sage brush, the outlook for us don't seem so good!

"Whereinhell d'yer suppose they got the photos?" demands the puzzled Sweeney. Then he turns to Sally Smith, and asks, "Did you see any fatheads snooping around here lately?"

"No, sir," she replies. "But it seems strange that they got some photographs, doesn't it?"

"Not only that," admits my boy friend, "but it's very annoying."

"Well," I says, "I guess we'll have to drain this drum or get drained ourselves. All I see ahead is a complete assortment of grief!"

"Your feet getting chilly?" he sneers.

"Not exactly," I retorts; "but at the same time they never was much good at running. Anyhow, we have already collected enough jack to dig a few canals, ain't we?"

"Blaah!" he snorts. "D'yer suppose I'm sap enough to let go some of this easy sugar? Be your age, Big Boy. Other realtors are peddling much worse junk than ours, and if they can get away with it, why can't we?"

I'm about to make one of my usual witty rejoinders, when in walks Mons. John Carter, the Washington gumshoe.

"Well, gentlemen," he begins as sober as a wise bootlegger, "I'm sorry to find that you have not started your drainage system. You will be gracious enough to explain, I presume?"

"Positively," says Sweeney. "You know how hard it is to get any service in Florida these days, don't you? Well, we been trying to get a firm in Tampa to come over and start work, but they're so busy they keep stalling us off."

"That," says Mr. Carter, "is really too bad. In fact, it puts you in a very unenviable position. What's more, it might put you in jail."

"All right, fellow," replies Sweeney, holding his red-headed temper with difficulty. "I'll do my best to get some action within the next few days, if I don't—"

"I'll take you for a trip," adds Carter, and walks out briskly.

Although we continued to get some more donations from the Northwest, they became a few fewer than few, while the threatening letters became bigger and better. One

genial rancher remarks that he might gather a posse and come down for an interview.

"I guess," says Sweeney, "we better start draining."

"The guess," I agrees, "is one of your best. Send out feelers to all the contractors, and knock down the job to the cheapest burglar."

At that moment, Mr. Shorthorn Shannon chugs up in his Detroit Demon, hops out, and presents us with a pleasant smile.

"Hello, brother!" greets Sweeney. "Glad to see you again. How's tricks in Miami?"

"Shore had a swell time, pardner," he says. He takes a squint at the property, and continues, "I'm prime tickled that you ain't done no drainin' around Rio Del Rancho."

"Stop kidding," says Sweeney. "We're gonna get busy on emptying this moisture darn pronto."

"Wal, you can suit yourselves about the other lots, but I don't want you to monkey with mine."

"You ain't serious, are you?" demands Sweeney. "You must be kidding, fellow!"

"I ain't kiddin' you, pardner, and you ain't gointa kid me, either. I have paid for that lot in full and you ain't got no right to mess around with my personal property!"

"You must be daffy!" snaps Sweeney. "How in Gehenna can we drain the other land without also draining yours? Brother, get yourself a straight-jacket, you need a keeper!"

"Careful with loose remarks, pardner," fires back Shorthorn, with narrowing eyes. "I don't aim to stir up any ruckus, but back in Wyoming we resent pusonal references. And I repeat once more that I don't want my lot drained, and I mean what I says!"

At this point in the debate, a car stops, and in comes our litle admirer, John Carter. Honest, he couldn't have pieked a worse moment to call, and was as welcome as arsenic in the soup!

"What!" begins John, right off the griddle; "nothing started yet?"

This is too much for Calithumpian Sweeney. He gets as red as a bottle of ketchup, and begins to pop-off like a string of fire-crackers.

"Do I see your ugly pan again?" he snorts. "Besides, how can we drain this dump when this prize chump here refuses to have us touch his lot?"

"I'm afraid that I don't quite gather your meaning," replies Mons. Carter.

Sweeney explains the situation and, after he had exploded for five minutes, Shorthorn tells his version.

"Well," says the government gent, after hearing both sides of the scenario, "I admit this is a very peculiar situation. However, under the law, Mr. Shannon is justified in demanding that you refrain from draining his property."

"Then where do we stand?" barks Sweeney, working up more steam.

"That's your affair, not mine," says Mr. Carter. "You are probably correct when you state that you can't drain the land without also draining Mr. Shannon's lot; but you'll have to drain the rest, and that blame quickly!"

A tasty situation, eh?

"Well, wise guy," says Sweeney to Shorthorn, "maybe you can figure it out. This man is a government agent, and he demands that I drain the property or go to the can. And I can't drain the rest without also draining yours, seeing that your slice is right in the middle. Say something!"

"Wal," drawls Shorthorn, "maybe we can get together and figger it out."

"Not with my head, you can't," admits Sweeney. "Let's see what's in your nut."

"As I see it, pardners," obliges Shorthorn, "you claim you can't drain the rest of the property without draining mine with it. But since I don't want mine touched, that leaves you holding the steers tail. I also understand that if you don't get busy, you will be arrested for usin' the mails to defraud. Is that right, officer?"

"It is," replies John Carter—the big stiff!

"For cripes sake, kid," yelps Sweeney, "come to the point! What are we gonna do? What are you driving at, anyway?"

Before replying Shorthorn walks over to the desk, takes a seat, and mops some Florida climate off his brow.

"Wal, gentlemen," he says finally, "if you can't drain the land without also draining mine, there's only one way out."

"And that is?" requests Sweeney.

"Pardner," says Shorthorn, "you must be kinda dumb. If I was in your boots, I could see it plum plain. All you gotta do to settle the matter is to—buy me out!"

A fine sock in the whiskers!

"Oh, so that's the game, hey?" whoops

Sweeney, fit to be tied. "You admit you're a wise bird, huh? Well, I'll tell you what I'll do, mister—I'll just give you back the price you paid for the lot, and that's all!"

"Not interested," says Shorthorn. "I craved a little more in the rebate line. I paid you five hundred dollars, and if I get back only five hundred, how can I tell the folks back to home that I made any money in Floridy real estate? So if you will just add fifteen hundred to my five, mebbe we can talk business."

"Call his bluff!" I shouts, getting dizzy from the thought that we got a good chance of landing in the cooler. Besides, I knew he held the whip hand and could of held us up for a king's ransom. "It's robbery, but show the lad we're no pikers."

"I consider that a wise move," butts in Mr. Carter. "I'm afraid it's the only way out."

Sweeney chokes with rage, dashes over to the desk, grabs the check book, and makes out a check for two thousand dollars, payable to Mr. Shorthorn Shannon. Without even drying the ink, he picks it up and fires it at Shorthorn.

"Here's your dough, smart boy!" fumes Sweeney. "Pick up the marbles, you win! And now that it's all settled, I'll just give you a sock on the nose for remembrance!"

Sweeney rips off his coat, and is about to ruin Shorthorn, when Sally Smith leaps from her seat, and runs between 'em.

"Don't you dare assault my husband!" she screams. "You crook! You're just mad because we beat you at your own game, that's all. Oh, I just wish I had a bat-pin!"

Business is good, huh?

"Ah ha!" squeaks Sweeney, "so that's how the game was worked, hey? Little wifey plays detective for her darling husband! Well, I know when I'm licked and I give you kids credit for putting over a fast one."

"Thank you so much!" mocks Mrs.

Shorthorn Shannon. "Er, perhaps you'd be interested to know just how it was done?"

"For one, I would!" I snaps out.

"Well, little boys," says n e Sally Smith, "when Shorthorn sent in his first payment from home, I had a hunch that he was going to be cheated, so I came down to investigate. I didn't think I'd be so fortunate as to land a job in the same office, but when I saw your advertisement I leaped with joy. That was my profession before I married Shorthorn, and I'm sure glad that I took the course!"

"Go on," mumbles Sweeney, "I'm all ears."

"Shoot, kid," I adds, "you're faded."

"Well," continues our cute stenographer, "when I found out how things were going I got in touch with some of the other buyers back North, and hinted at the situation. Then I had some snapshots taken, while you gentlemen were out, and sent them around. Maybe that will explain why you received so many letters from your clients. And when you sent Shorthorn a telegram, telling him not to come, I sent a counter telegram, stating that there wasn't any smallpox, or anything, in Florida, and for him to come ahead. But we owe most of our success to father's kind assistance."

"Father?" echoes Sweeney. "Did you have your whole family in on this?"

"Who's your pop?" I asks.

"His name is John Carter, agent for the U. S. Post Office, and he's standing right behind you!"

Weep, no more, my lady!

"Well!" ejaculates Sweeney. "For a bunch of saps you birds get along fine!"

"Saps?" echoes the cute little gal. "Say, brother, let me ask you something: When a man buys a lot for five hundred dollars, and then sells it back to the man he bought it from for two thousand dollars—well, who's the sap?"

Ask me another!



BILL JOHNSON came up from the cramped engine room of the two masted auxiliary schooner *Miramar* and sat down on the edge of the low cabin roof. After that he stretched, which it was impossible to do below, and wiped the sweat from his face with a handful of comparatively clean waste.

From his place by the port rail of the poop, Captain Horace Chenoweth, immaculate in white broadcloth shirt and duck trousers, regarded the engineer innocently.

"What's matter, Bill? Not hot, are you?"

Bill looked up in surprise. "Lord, no, Duke. I doubt if it's over a hundred and ten down there. What kind of time we makin'?"

Chenoweth walked over and sat down beside him. "Between twelve and thirteen knots. Mate heaved the log just before he went off watch. About four o'clock now and a hundred miles to go. We ought to be in San Lorenzo by midnight."

"Yeh, and have our cargo ashore before morning. That'll take a weight off Don Manuel's mind, all right."

"Sure will. Just imagine him sitting

around waiting for Rosalva's sea planes to bomb the city, without a single anti-aircraft gun or fighting plane to meet them. No wonder we got such a hurry call."

The red haired engineer grinned. "Hurry call is right. Chaperonin' three Tommy Morse Scouts from New York to Key West by rail, to Havana by ferry and this far on the way to San Lorenzo in a dinky schooner, ain't so bad for three days work, if I do say it myself. Old Mendez was right much excited when he gave us our orders, wasn't he?"

"I should say he had a right to be. Since last summer, when we helped Don Manuel back into the president's job, Mendez has been San Lorenzan Minister to the United States, sitting on the world and taking thing easy. Then he hears that General Rosalva, instead of staying politely in exile, has bobbed up again in San Lorenzo with a new army and the makings of an air force. Furthermore the report said the insurrectos would be ready for a combined attack in less than a week. We'll be in time to welcome 'em though."

"Looks like it. Don Manuel's got two or three ex-British flyers down there already and when they get these Tommy

*A Novelette of Airplanes,
the Sea and a Toy Revolution
All Mixed with Excitement*

Sea Birds

By MILLARD WARD

Morses they'll be able to hold their own and then some, against any sea planes in the world. Don't reckon Rosalva's boys'll pot us before we get in, do you?"

"Not likely to," replied Chenoweth calmly, "even if they know we're coming. First place we're not in the straight track from Havana to San Lorenzo. I cut out to the north and west to fool 'em. Second place we look just like any one of fifty schooners in the Caribbean. The *Miramar* was built for speed, but Don Manuel's gents in Havana were working on her while we were on the train and you can see for yourself they made her pretty average looking. Took off her fore topmast, stuck that heavy jib boom on her and smutted her up in general. If we see a plane we'll just cut speed and look like any sponge fisherman with a kicker. They can't land and search every stray schooner between Cuba and San Lorenzo. When it comes to getting into the harbor itself, it'll be pitch dark and they won't be able to make us out. Rosalva getting his planes first puts us at a mean disadvantage. We're working for the government, but we have to be just as cautious as if we weren't."

"Wonder how come Don Manuel didn't

send his men to Havana to fly the darn things home—or else send a warship for 'em and be safe."

Chenoweth shook his head. "Too far to fly. Those little fighting planes don't have much cruising radius and anyhow they've got no pontoons. Forced landing at sea would lose 'em altogether. As for the warship, he's got none. You remember Mendez said the *Santissima Trinidad* was out of commission, and that was the only one he ever did have."

"That's so, Duke," admitted the engineer slowly. "Puts it strictly up to us."

"Meesta Johnson, you leave your cigarette below. You want?"

Another voice, soft and faintly apologetic, broke into the conversation and the two officers turned sharply. José Hidalgo, the assistant engineer, was standing at the head of the companionway extending a small, crumpled package. He was a slim, dark man with high cheek bones and slanting eyes, San Lorenzo by birth, he said, but curiously Oriental in manner. It had become evident, however, in the thirty-six hours since the *Miramar* left Havana that he was a first rate gas engineer and a good seam as well.

Bill Johnson reached out and took the cigarettes. "Thanks, José. I did forget them."

The brown assistant bowed gracefully and ducked back down the ladder.

Chenoweth frowned. "How long do you suppose that bird was listening to us, Bill?"

"Don't know. Might ask the helmsman."

Bill slipped down from his seat and went aft to the wheel. "Say, Juan, how long was that fellow standing there before he spoke up?"

The helmsman was a young Cuban with a pleasant, rather vacant face. He looked up from the compass inquiringly.

"Sir?"

"I said," repeated Bill patiently, "how long was that fellow standing there before he spoke up?"

The sailor smiled amiably. "Oh, sir, for a period of time. Only the good God or a man with a watch could say exactly. I have no watch but I can say with safety that he stood there for a period of time."

Bill looked him over thoughtfully, then returned to his place beside the captain.

"Juan says he was there for a period of time, Duke, but I reckon it's all right. Federal agent in Havana sent him aboard."

After that they lapsed into a comfortable silence.

THE *Miramar* was stepping along splendidly. The rhythmic, satisfying song of the motor floated up from the open companionway and the slow heaving of the Caribbean swells was almost lost in her eager drive ahead. The sea was a great sheet of indigo in which the schooner's brave white bow wave and wake faded quickly and only a little way astern were entirely blue again. The dainty violet sails of a Portuguese man o' war passed close under the port fail and a wide, undulating field of brown gulf weed parted reluctantly before the sharp bow. The afternoon sunlight was quiet and golden.

On board the schooner herself the only unusual feature was a flaming red shirt, which with a pair of faded overalls fluttered from a line rigged between foremast and forestay. The sails were all furled and in gaskets, so there was no danger of the clothesline fouling running rigging, and though Chenoweth found himself watching

the spot of color curiously, he saw no reason for objecting to it.

At his elbow Bill Johnson chuckled lazily. "Some shirt that assistant of mine has up there, ain't it, Duke?"

The captain nodded. "Looks like the loading explosives signal, but I don't suppose anyone would mistake it out here."

"Not likely," agreed Bill carelessly. "Land there ahead, ain't it?"

"Um-hum. I've had my eye on that for some time."

A small island had risen out of the water far up on the starboard bow while they were talking and now drew steadily toward the beam. With its wide, gently sloping beach of dazzling sand upon which almost imperceptible swells rose suddenly and broke in curling foam and its few low cedar and tall green palm trees gathered in the center, it was a desert isle in the true romantic spirit. There were no signs of life upon it and on all sides the blue water stretched unbroken to the horizon.

The captain of the *Miramar*, however, had seen too many such to be interested in it except as a means of verifying his position. He went leisurely down the companionway into the cabin to consult the chart and was gone for several minutes. When he returned he found Bill Johnson stretched full length on the cabin roof, his head pillowed upon his arms. Instead of disturbing him, the captain walked over to the rail and sat down in a camp chair which had been left there by the mate, Mr. Ramejas, who was fat and easily tired.

Presently Bill grew bored. "Hey, Duke, where's that magazine I seen you readin' this mornin'? You know, the thick one with the green cover."

Chenoweth raised his eyes. "No, no," he replied soothingly. "You don't want that magazine. It's got no pictures in it."

Then, while the engineer was looking about for something to throw, there was a sound which brought them both to their feet, forgetful of everything else. It was a distant, muffled hum that rose and fell like the droning of a giant bee.

Bill plunged down the companionway with the captain's piercing rattle, "Cut her to three knots, quick," in his ears, and the captain himself for no particular reason dashed over, shoved the helmsman away from the wheel and stood rather foolishly passing the spokes through his hands.

When the engineer came back on deck the *Miramar* had already slowed, and soon, compared to her former speed, was little more than drifting.

"All right for a sponger to have a kicker," observed Chenoweth with elaborate calm, "but it's not customary for 'em to make thirteen knots. Can you see that fellow yet?"

Both men craned their necks aloft and while they were so occupied the head of the brown assistant engineer showed briefly in the companionway and ducked back unnoticed. A dark speck had appeared in the blue sky to the southward and was taking shape with great rapidity. It was a big, gray seaplane, flying low and heading directly for the schooner. In a few seconds it would pass overhead.

José, with a beautiful appearance of childish curiosity, came climbing up from the engine room and gaped at the approaching plane. Somehow, almost imperceptibly, as he looked, he was moving and when the seaplane went roaring over the *Miramar* he had reached the taffrail directly behind the captain and engineer.

Chenoweth was about to turn with a sharp reminder about watching the engine and Bill was saying excitedly, "You reckon I better get them rifles from the cabin, Duke?" when a hard object was placed suddenly against the small of each man's back and José's peculiarly sweet voice said, "You not move."

At the same time the gray seaplane banked steeply and circled back, hardly above the water. The two officers stood rigidly motionless but with minds racing frantically. Something of this must have communicated itself to José, for he spoke again with an unmistakable note of sincerity in his voice.

"You not make me shoot. If you die you not save your ship. You throw your life away. No good."

They relaxed somewhat then and watched with fascinated eyes as clear spray flashed from under the pontoons of the seaplane a little distance ahead. She sank deeper, the water flying in white clouds from her bow, lost way rapidly and came to a full stop, lifting easily on the swells.

At the same time the engine of the *Miramar* coughed doubtfully, wheezed a time or two and died. Both craft lay idle not fifty yards apart.

"I'm damned," exclaimed Bill indignantly, "if that don't look like magic. Who stopped that engine?"

"I cut off the gas at the tank when I came up," exclaimed José gently. "When she use little bit in pipe she stop. You see?"

"But what I want to know," broke in Chenoweth violently, "is how in hell you signalled that plane."

The assistant engineer chuckled so heartily that they could feel the vibration in the pistol muzzles against their backs.

"You see that little red shirt on my clothesline? Yes? Flying man see him, too. He see many schooner today and fly on. He see schooner with red flag, he stop. Savvy?"

Chenoweth groaned aloud. "Damn right I savvy, but it's too late now. What are you going to do?"

AT THAT moment an impatient hail came from the seaplane, where a leather-helmeted man had risen in the cockpit and was beckoning imperatively.

José shouted an acknowledgment, then lowered his voice again. "You call that sailor on your watch, Captain. You tell him row over fetch flying man back. He *Capitano* in General Rosalva's army. He tell you what to do."

As Chenoweth hesitated, the pistol muzzle became very still against his back. "You go," said the gentle voice. "You tell him."

Chenoweth thought that shrugging his shoulders would look well but refrained from doing it. "Oh, all right."

The sailor from whom he had taken the wheel had been standing by, openmouthed, watching the little drama. He felt quite sure that any move on his part would result in the immediate perforation of both his superiors, so had not attempted to interfere. Now Chenoweth spoke to him in a more or less natural voice.

"Take the boat, Juan. Pull over and bring that señor aviator fellow on board. Make a good job of it."

While Juan lowered away the stout clinker built boat that swung from the stern davits, clambered in and rowed away toward the seaplane, the two senior officers continued to stand very still. Each felt his own automatic pistol, which he had carried ever since leaving New York, fairly

burning his hip pocket, but could think of no way to reach it.

Chenoweth addressed José again without turning his head.

"This is a fine way to repay us for the easy time we've given you aboard here, isn't it? If we hadn't trusted you, you couldn't have pulled a trick like this."

The voice was quieter than ever. "We play for bigger thing than one man trust one man, Captain. You have treat me well. Yes. So you live now. If you not treat me well, I shoot instead of say 'Not move,'—you see?"

"Sure, we see," broke in Bill Johnson. "And if you're feelin' talkative, how'd you get that agent in Havana to ship you with us, anyhow?"

"Not hard," replied José indifferently. "I just show 'nother man's discharge from Federal army and say I loyal like hell. Time short and he need a man."

There seemed to be nothing more to say after that, so they waited in silence until the small boat came back, scraping alongside the *Miramar*, bringing two helmeted officers from the enemy plane.

When they had scrambled aboard, the rebel captain drew his service automatic from its holster and came aft, leaving his companion, whose tunic bore the "O" and single wing of an observer, waiting at the rail amidships.

The captain was a compact, broad-shouldered man with a tiny, black moustache. His swarthy face, though ridiculously smudged with carbon during his long flight, was handsome in a disturbing, animal way. With his lips slightly parted over his even, white teeth, he looked dangerous, even, Chenoweth thought, tigerish. Bill Johnson, less impressionable, simply didn't like his looks and eyed him without favor.

When the aviator reached the little group at the stern, José suggested quietly, "These men are armed, *Capitano*."

The pilot grunted contemptuously, stepped up to the two seamen and carelessly slapped their pockets. Finding a gun on each man's hip, he extracted them none too gently and threw them into the sea. Turning back, he snarled, "You, hands over you heads. So." Then he marched the disarmed men to the port shrouds and left them under José's guard while he went up to the small hatch amidships.

The seaman, Juan, encouraged by the big automatic, threw off the hatch covers with notable speed and preceded the aviator below. When they reappeared, the officer was perspiring but exultant.

"They are here," he called to his observer, a tall, sardonic looking fellow. "Three fine Tommy Morses. It is a pity to destroy them, but we have no time to spare."

He came aft again with an easy, confident stride.

Just at this time Mr. Ramejas, who had been dozing in the cabin, began to wonder why the engine had been stopped so long and came lumbering up to investigate. As his head appeared in the open the seaplane pilot reached over and thrust a gun under his nose. The fat mate drew in his breath in a sharp gasp and said, "*Dio mio*," respectfully. The aviator laughed, rubbed the muzzle of the automatic gently against Ramejas' teeth and ordered him under the main rigging with the others.

He had scarcely taken his place in line when the observer herded aft the two seamen, Carlos and Juan, and added them to the collection. None of the prisoners moved or spoke.

After staring at them sourly for a minute or two, the observer suggested to the pilot in a bored voice that they shoot down all hands and get on back for supper. The captain shook his head regretfully.

"That would be my idea, too, but our orders are not so. If we sink the vessel and leave them to the little boat, it will satisfy the general and keep them out of the coming action. Maybe out of every action. Guard a moment."

He stepped back abruptly and dived down the ladder into the cabin. When he returned, he was carrying the schooner's log book and a bright new ax under one arm and several high powered rifles under the other. The rifles he tumbled overboard carelessly, but the book he tossed down into the small boat which still lay in the water alongside.

"That will look well with my report to the general," he smiled to the observer. "Meantime, you," he indicated Juan with a jerk of the thumb, "come with me."

Again they went forward together and disappeared into the hold. From below the aviator's voice came first, sharp and menacing, then Juan's docile reply, and

finally the dull "chuck" of the ax striking wood.

"Goin' to scuttle us, huh?" muttered Bill Johnson, but the observer turned upon him such a venomous eye that he subsided ungracefully.

The blows of the ax continued until at last there was a rending, splintering sound, followed by the unmistakable rush of water. The officer emerged hastily from the hatchway, driving the sailor before him, and called to his comrades at the stern.

"It is done. Come quickly."

Then, still covering the crew of the schooner with their guns, the insurgents retreated to the rail amidships and dropped down into the boat. From there the pilot shouted to Juan, whom he seemed to have taken for his unwilling orderly, to come and pull them back to the seaplane. After that, he added ironically, he could do what he liked with the boat.

AS THE little craft drew away from the side, the four men on the poop of the sinking *Miramar* lowered their cramped arms and stared after it foolishly.

Bill Johnson laughed dryly. "They got us, Duke. Not a gun left on board. I figured there was something funny about that assistant of mine."

"Yes, they got us," agreed the captain dully. "We better bring up some fresh water and grub for the boat."

All four made a hurried trip into the cabin, the engineer returning with a full keg of water balanced on his shoulder and the others with arms full of boxes of hard tack and tinned food. The schooner had been provisioned for only four days, so they left the store-room almost empty.

When they had put down their loads on the cabin roof and straightened up, they saw that the aviators were back in their places aboard the plane, with José Hidalgo crowded in beside the observer. Juan was standing in the row boat, holding to the edge of the lower wing. The pilot was evidently speaking to him, though his voice was not audible aboard the schooner. A moment later he waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal and the sailor began pulling back as fast as he could toward the *Miramar*.

The schooner had been settling steadily all the while, and when at last the boat came scraping under her stern, she had no

more than six inches of freeboard remaining amidships. Only the glassy calm of the sea had saved her from going under minutes before.

The supplies were tumbled unceremoniously into the boat, though the water keg, which had an open bung hole, was handled more carefully, and followed in close order by the men. Captain Chenoweth was last to leave his ship, though by a margin of less than half a second, and it was he himself who shoved off with a lusty drive of the boat hook.

Juan began rowing again with great earnestness but the heavily-laden tender was only a few yards away when the *Miramar* lurched forward gently and began to go down. She sank with surprising deliberation, not making a dive at all. The water poured leisurely out over the hatch coaming, met other water flowing in over the side, and inevitably the deck was gone. The poop rose a bit, then slipped down at a slight angle. The sea closed over the cabin roof and the masts began to shrink. The water was very clear, but the burnished path of the sun lay directly over the sinking vessel. Above this expanse of molten gold the mastheads looked black and sharp, like an etching. The water about them boiled up in appearing and disappearing discs of oily smoothness, and from somewhere near the mainmast came a persistent string of bubbles. The deckhouses were two fathoms deep and the sea was lapping halfway up the main rigging, when all at once the sinking stopped. The hull of the *Miramar* had reached the flat sandy bottom, twenty feet below the surface, and was lying tranquilly on an almost perfectly even keel.

The passengers in the small boat eyed the projecting mastheads without enthusiasm. Even Juan, who, since there was no particular place to row to, had stopped rowing, managed to look vaguely resentful.

"Chart's accurate, anyhow," muttered the captain. "Gives three to four fathoms, with white sand bottom. That's Teredo Cay over there." He nodded toward the little palm-topped island, a quarter of a mile away. "Maybe we better go ashore there until we figure things out."

"Might as well," agreed Bill indifferently. "A fair breeze of wind would swamp this damn dingy of ours."

At that moment the motor of the sea-

plane, which was still drifting a little way off, coughed loudly and began a series of accelerated pops. The big propeller whirled rapidly, lost the appearance of definite motion and became a circle of vibrating light. The plane coasted forward in a long straight sweep of foam, the motor roaring, then the foam fell away suddenly and the big body, still glistening with water, swept on just above the surface, like a celestial whale.

The plane had taken off in the opposite direction from the drifting boat, so the castaways were relieved.

"Good riddance," grumbled Bill Johnson, "but that *pyseno* might have treated us worse than he did, at that. Maybe he ain't as mean as he looks."

He had hardly finished speaking when the seaplane banked ponderously and swung back toward them. "What the hell's he up to now?"

The plane came on, only a few feet above the surface. They could see the pilot's head, dark against the silver disc of the propeller, while the engine thundered in their ears. He was bearing directly down upon the boat, the huge, gray shape between it and the sun.

"Damn him," cried Chenoweth in quick alarm. "Damn him! What's he doing?"

There was a rush of air in their faces, an incredible tumult, and the five men hurried themselves backward in horror. The boat capsized promptly, leaving them struggling in the water among floating tins of hardtack and loose oars. The wide pontoon of the seaplane flashed over their heads with scarcely a yard of clearance and drove on toward the horizon, climbing in a long slant.

Of the crew of the *Miramar*, Bill Johnson went down farthest. The others had already splashed back to the overturned boat and found holds upon it when his head broke the surface. The engineer gasped, coughed up a quart or two of sea water and swept the wet red hair from his eyes. For a moment he stared after the big sea plane, fading rapidly into the sun-swept western sky, then turned back and caught the edge of the boat between Chenoweth and Juan.

"Duke," he said slowly. "I take back what I said about that feller. He ain't much good."

Chenoweth's face was white and his eyes

blazing. "Rotten hound! Our water's gone."

Bill looked around anxiously. The tins of hardtack were floating easily upon the calm sea behind them, scattered somewhat but undoubtedly there. Of the tinned vegetables and the heavy, iron bound scuttle butt there was not a sign.

"Damn," breathed the engineer, "so it is. What we better do?"

The captain laughed harshly. "It doesn't make much difference what we do. We might as well try to get to land, though. If we all get on one side we can right the boat again. We'll get those hardtack cans and the oars inside and then we can swim and pull the thing to that island there. It's not far."

So, after almost half an hour of struggling and splashing along, one of the sailors found that he could reach bottom with his feet, and the five men staggered in through the low surf, beached the unwieldy boat and dumped out her cargo of salt water. Then, with a common impulse, they dropped where they were on the dry, white sand and lay, breathing heavily.

THE land about them was even more barren than it had looked from the schooner and there was a delicate odor of decaying fish from a windrow of minnows swept up on the beach by the waves. The fronds of the palm trees were sere and brown underneath while the few warped and stunted cedars only accentuated the dryness of the place.

The men were already a little thirsty and the knowledge that there was no water made them more keenly aware of it than they otherwise would have been. They looked at each other furtively.

"Where's the nearest place with fresh water on it, Duke?" inquired Bill casually.

Chenoweth dug his heels into the loose sand and frowned. "None closer than the mainland, ninety miles southwest. Don't think we could make it."

The men got up and began wandering aimlessly about, not speaking to each other. After a while they realized that the sun had set, and gathered again about the little boat in the twilight. No one had any appetite for dry hardtack and there was no means of lighting a fire. The captain's waterproof matchbox was still on board the schooner.

About four hundred yards from shore the masts of the *Miramar* were still visible above the water, a neat head and foot stone for their hopes. Bill and Chenoweth sat side by side on the gunwale of the small boat and stared glumly out to sea. The failure of their adventure seemed too apparent to talk about. The other men surrounded them in various dejected attitudes, staring for the most part at the sand beneath their feet.

Presently Bill raised his arm and pointed. "Tide's falling, Duke. You can see three or four more ratlines on the main shrouds. More foremast, too."

Chenoweth nodded without much interest. "Yes, it'll go down seven or eight feet yet. Leave only about a fathom of water on deck. The sea's awfully shallow around here." He laughed bitterly. "Might as well be a mile deep, though. There's no fresh water on board."

"I know that," admitted the engineer. "But we might get some kind of a mast and sail for the boat. We can't stay on this damn sand bar and rot, can we?"

"No, I suppose not. We won't be able to do anything until morning, though. Have to stay where we are for the night."

Darkness had fallen very rapidly after sunset and a big yellow star was already winking above the gaunt mastheads of the sunken schooner. The gray sea began ruffling under a cool breeze from the north and the surf rolled in over the level beach with a sound like the breathing of a weary giant. The men, in their drenched cotton clothes, shivered and drew closer together.

Presently Ramejas took out his clasp knife, opened it and hauled himself to his feet.

"I tink, *Capitano*," he said solemnly, "we go cut plenty palm branches, make bed in lee of boat we maybe get some sleep. If not, I don' tink so."

Bill Johnson grinned. "Noble idea. I feel chilly as the devil. We'll send these spry young sailors up to cut the leaves and drop 'em down to us. Come on, Duke. Show some interest. What's the matter with you?"

An hour later the castaways settled themselves for the night. The little boat had been turned on its side and banked around with sand, while behind this wind break a great heap of palm fronds, both dry and green, had been collected, almost

denuding the few trees on the island. In this shelter, neither very warm nor very comfortable, but a good deal better than the open beach, the five men stretched out side by side and rested. All of them had worked hard during the past forty-eight hours and the sound of the waves was infinitely soothing, so before long they began one by one to fall asleep.

A white moon rose presently above the edge of the boat and peeped down into their faces, but no one stirred and a big land crab, ambling past on business of his own, heard nothing but deep and regular breathing.

THE next morning in the thin light of dawn Chenoweth woke suddenly. The stem of a palm leaf seemed to be imbedded in the small of his back, his legs were cramped and he was cold. The breeze had died down toward morning and the voice of the surf was little more than a murmur, but, none the less, he was chilled to the bone. He parted the leaves over him with some unavoidable rustling, rose cautiously to his feet and stepped clear of his sleeping companions. There was grayness all about him, nearly black at the western horizon and nearly white in the fine sand at his feet, but all gray. The sea itself was slate-colored.

As Chenoweth's eyes swept over the water he picked up the masts of the *Miramar* again, listed a little to starboard in the change of the tides and with an infuriating appearance of resignation about them. It was as though the schooner had folded her hands and resolved to bear her fate with Christian fortitude. Then, as his gaze shifted, he snorted in sudden amazement.

Just beyond the line of the surf a little way down the beach a huge black cylinder was floating at a rakish angle in the water, one end raised clear of the surface, the other submerged. It was quite blunt at the exposed end, five feet in diameter and upwards of twenty feet long.

"Maybe a dead whale?" he muttered doubtfully, but when he sniffed the wind inquiringly he found it quite untainted. "Queer! Damn queer."

He stood watching for several minutes while the daylight strengthened, then all at once his face cleared and he walked quickly back toward the shelter.

FINDING the others still asleep, he leaned down and poked Bill Johnson in the ribs. The engineer woke quietly and looked a question. Chenoweth beckoned without speaking and moved away down the beach. Scrambling up, Bill followed him curiously.

A few rods from the boat the captain halted.

"Say, Bill, take a look at that."

He pointed out over the surf to the spot where the black cylinder floated, now distinctly visible. The engineer whistled softly.

"What the dickens is it? One of Jonah's taxicabs?"

"No," replied Chenoweth briefly, "it's a tall can buoy, broke its moorings and drifted here from elsewhere. Does it make you think of anything?"

Bill yawned extravagantly. "Nope, unless sausage which I wish I had some of."

Chenoweth laughed excitedly and the engineer looked at him with interest.

"What does it make you think of, Duke?"

The captain's lips drew taut.

"I don't know what kind of providence sent it to us, Bill, but it makes me think we're going to salvage the *Miramar* with our bare hands."

Bill did not answer for almost a minute, then he said slowly, "Well, Duke, you got at least one man you can figure on."

"Even after me getting him into such a mess as this?"

"It wasn't your fault, kid. You had a right to trust the crew Don Manuel sent you. It was Hidalgo spilled our beans."

"Yes," agreed Chenoweth with vehemence, "it certainly was. But there's no good holding post mortems. It's the future that interests us now. Let's go and turn out the crew."

Back at the shelter again, they found Ramejas and the two sailors already up, standing together at the side of the boat, looking helpless. The sun had just risen in clear splendor out of the sea and the air was brilliant and exhilarating, but there was no water and the men were sullen. They had seen the big stranded buoy but were not interested in it.

Chenoweth came up to them with as confident a stride as he could manage through the loose sand.

"Listen, you fellows. I haven't said

much so far because there hasn't been much to say but now we're going to get busy. Barring a hurricane we can have the schooner ready to sail again inside of twenty-four hours. I've got my plan all made. Can I figure on you when I need you?"

Juan and Ramejas nodded apathetically but Carlos, who was a big, squarely built fellow with heavy features, scowled and shook his head.

"I tink we do better take boat and row for coast," he broke out rebelliously. "Too much thirst we wait for schooner. Maybe no good anyhow."

Chenoweth's eyes narrowed but he replied quietly. "You're wrong, Carlos. You want to row ninety miles in this sun with no compass or water. It's better to try the plan I have. Come on, now. Lend a hand to get the boat in the water. Mr. Johnson and I are going out to the schooner."

Carlos remained stubbornly aloof, but the other four, disregarding him, hauled the little craft down to the water's edge and rushed her safely through the low, warm breakers, Bill and Chenoweth scrambling aboard together.

While Juan and Ramejas waded back to land, the captain took the oars and motioned Bill to a place in the stern. Both men were dripping wet but the sun was growing stronger every minute and they did not suffer any more from cold.

Chenoweth pulled leisurely along just outside the breakers, on a course parallel with the shore until they came abreast of the big can buoy, which was still afloat, though grinding every now and then on the shingle. There he stopped rowing for a moment.

"Grab the end of that stern fast and stand by, Bill. We're going to take a tow."

He headed the boat straight out to sea and, holding her so, let her drift in to within a dozen feet of the buoy. Even so close at hand the black, dripping cylinder, rolling playfully in the swells, looked amazingly like a whale. There was a number painted in white on its under side, however, and in the center of the upper end a small eyebolt showed plainly. The boat drifted closer yet, Chenoweth guiding it with lazy strokes of the oars.

"Bill," he said calmly. "We're going right in. Soon as you can reach I want

you to reeve the end of your painter through that eyebolt on the buoy, bring it back and make it fast in the boat. If you get any fingers mashed off we'll have to knock you on the head because we have no hospital facilities."

Bill nodded without replying, knelt in the sternsheets, the line in his hand, and waited. The boat dropped in farther, hung within a yard of the buoy, rose on a surge and all but crashed into it. Then the line was fast and Chenoweth bending tremendously to his oars. The blades dragged and held in the unyielding water, but soon, as the strokes grew longer and more powerful, began gaining slowly. The buoy swung reluctantly off shore and lumbered after the boat, ripples weltering about its forward end and leaving a great fan shaped wake astern like a swimming cow.

Bill Johnson, having nothing particular to do, watched the sweat which soon began to trickle down the captain's face, and sighed luxuriously.

The sigh was not lost on Chenoweth. "Rest as fast as you can, big boy," he said breathlessly. "I'll have plenty for you to do later."

As the buoy gained headway, it moved more easily through the water and it was not very long before the boat drew alongside the projecting mainmast of the *Miramar*. Chenoweth unshipped his oars, threw the bow painter around the spar and made it fast. Then he scrambled aft over the thwarts and sat down beside the engineer.

"We've got a couple of hours to kill now," he announced serenely, "Want to go ashore or stay here?"

"Might as well stay here. It's comfortable enough and it's too much trouble getting in and out through the surf. But how come all the delay?"

"'Time and tide wait for no man', quoted the captain learnedly, "but they don't hurry up for any man either. We're waiting for low tide."

"Oh, we are, huh? And then what?"

"Did you notice," inquired Chenoweth with apparent irrelevance, "how slowly the *Miramar* went down? A little more and she'd have stayed afloat with her decks awash like a derelict. She sank at high tide yesterday and even then there was only twenty feet of water over her. If at low tide we make this big buoy fast to her hull, I believe as the tide rises again, and it

will rise for almost ten feet, it'll lift her right off bottom. There's a lot of air inside that can. Then, at high water we'll tow her in until she grounds. When the tide goes down on her new position it ought to leave the old tub's deck high and dry. There isn't enough surf to really bother us and we can run her close inshore. Then if we can't patch up a hole that's only a foot or two under water, we're not such hot seaman. Do you follow me at all?"

Bill Johnson sat bolt upright. "Hot damn, Duke! And then pump her out and ho for San Lorenzo. What?"

"Just," replied the captain, "so."

The engineer half turned and regarded him with a peculiar expression. "I suppose that's what they mean by brains, ain't it?"

Chenoweth laughed and pushed his head. "Let not him who putteth on his armor boast as him who taketh it off. -We haven't done anything yet."

After that they stretched out on the bottom boards and dozed for a long time in the warm December sunshine, not talking at all, while the water dropped gradually down the varnished masts of the schooner.

At last Chenoweth sat up abruptly, bumping his head somewhat on a thwart, and looked about. He noticed first that a dark tar stain on the main mast which had been exactly at the level of the water was now well above his head. The great, black buoy was floating placidly a few yards astern of the boat, lifting lazily from time to time as a swell ran under the glassy surface of the sea, but on the whole docile and obedient looking. The weighted end, which tapered down from the middle was two or three feet under water, but Chenoweth could see it clearly, with several links of its broken mooring chain still dangling from it.

Some distance away on the white beach of Teredo Cay he could make out the figures of Ramejas and the two sailors. The mate, unmistakable because of his bulk, was standing alone at the water's edge, gazing out toward the boat, one hand shading his eyes. Behind him Carlos and Juan were seated on the dry sand, their heads suspiciously close together. Noticing this, Chenoweth frowned.

"Um-hum," he muttered to himself, "I may have to handle that big boy yet. This is a ticklish job. Too many captains would spoil it."

A moment later he saw Ramejas drop his arm—the hopelessness of the gesture apparent even at the distance—turn back and join the seamen. It had been twenty hours since anyone had a drink.

CHENOWETH stood up and began hauling in the stern fast. The movement roused Bill Johnson who scrambled dutifully to his feet.

"What now, Duke?"

"Slack water," replied the captain briefly. "Time to do some work. Step forward and let go that bow painter, will you?"

Then, alternately pushing and pulling, like a tug on an Atlantic liner, the little boat worried the buoy into position, its long black side covering the whole distance between the fore and main masts of the schooner.

"That's well," said Chenoweth calmly, "Next we need a line. I think that main throat halliard will be strong enough for our purpose. Just reach up over your head and cut it adrift, will you, Bill? Be sure you get the right part, the one that's fast to the cleat below."

When Bill passed him the loose end he reeved it through the small eyebolt in the top of the buoy, began to make it fast, then hesitated.

"We ought to have this thing on as near as even keel as we can. It'd lift further that way. How about you climbing over on the end and weighting it down while I heave in here?"

Bill grinned obligingly. "Anything to please the children."

Reaching out, he pulled the boat around until it was broadside to the buoy, bore down cautiously on the round surface to test its stability, and actually succeeded in easing himself aboard. This brought the top of the buoy lower in the water and raised the other end until the axis was almost parallel with the surface. Chenoweth was satisfied, hauled taut the halliard and made it fast to the eyebolt with a round turn and two half hitches.

"All right. Let's move on to the forward end."

In attempting to leave his perch, however, Bill shifted his center of gravity too far to one side and the big can turned over vivaciously. The engineer went overboard in a spread eagle dive, all of him submerg-

ing at the same time and leaving only bubbles. A few seconds later he came up near the stern of the boat, spouting like a blackfish. As he attempted to scramble aboard, Chenoweth caught him impersonally by the seat of his duck trousers and brought him in with a run.

"I thought that would happen," he remarked as the engineer was picking himself up from the bottom boards, "but we won't need you on the other end."

Bill sat down a thwart, his feet in a growing pool of sea water that dripped from the legs of his trousers, and brushed the hair back from his eyes.

"Well," he said slowly, "if yuh should need me again, I believe I could balance her better."

Chenoweth glanced at him with a faintly startled expression, but turned back to his oars without making any comment. At the foremast also the captain cut loose the throat halliard and, lying flat in the boat, reached down into the water and made it securely fast to the weighted end of the buoy.

The sea was very calm and it was possible to make out clearly the entire deck of the schooner, as she lay only a fathom or so under water, her lines shimmering and undulating fantastically as ripples ran past beneath the surface. José's fateful shirt, still hanging on its line near the bow, made a striking spot of color in the pale green water and seemed to have aroused the intense interest of dozens of fishes of all sizes which swam curiously about or lay motionless, their noses almost touching the fabric, remarkably like pigs at a trough.

Bill Johnson, having squeezed the legs of his trousers fairly dry, leaned over beside the captain and stared down into the water.

"Sure is clear, ain't it? Yuh can see the lead of the ropes and everything. Wonder if this ol' can'll really lift her."

"We'll know before long. Tide's beginning to come up already."

They pushed the boat off a little way and sat watching rather grimly as the water rose, inch by inch around the buoy. The halliards at each end were taut as violin strings but held stoutly. Still the water crept up and the *Mwamar* did not stir. The exposed surface of the buoy shrank to a long ellipse, and Bill and Chenoweth looked at each other anxiously, trying to

moisten stiff, parched lips with tongues almost as dry. The ellipse, too, was shrinking, the buoy was almost submerged. The two men leaned forward, breathing heavily, as the water lapped in and in, now hesitating, now advancing with little rushes. At last the buoy went under altogether and the surface of the water lay smooth and unbroken between the projecting masts.

Chenoweth groaned in a stifled way and dropped his head in his hands. Bill Johnson did not move, but sat staring straight before him.

Then abruptly with a faint, rippling sigh, the back of the big can appeared again, breaching nearly a third out of water, the sunlight gleaming on its dripping paint, raising the two masts an equal distance. Bill caught his breath sharply, and swung around in exultation to pound Chenoweth between the shoulders.

"Look, Duke! She's up! She was only stuck and took a minute to work loose. Boy, she's off the bottom. Rowdy dow!"

The captain raised his eyes, blinked incredulously, then caught Bill in a vice-like hug and attempted a perilous waltz.

"Hot damn, lilly! So she is! I knew it ought to work and it works. We'll get those planes there in time yet, Bill."

When his first excitement passed, he let go his hold and stood, positively beaming down on the big can buoy.

"We're all set now. Tide'll be rising five hours yet. We might as well go ashore and stretch our legs. Any drifting the old tub does will be in the right direction, so we can leave her alone until high water."

He dropped down on a thwart, took the oars again and pulled leisurely back toward the island. When he and Bill had run the boat safely in through the surf and beached it high and dry, they looked up to find Ramejas and the two sailors glowering at them from a spot a few yards away. Chenoweth walked toward the little group eagerly.

MY PLAN'S working, boys. Three more tides and we'll have the *Miramar* afloat."

The men turned at once to look at the schooner's masts, but at the distance could find little change in their appearance. Their faces remained sullen and the big sailor, Carlos, replied in a thick, scantily respectful voice

"We no see. Too long wait. We take boat now, we get to land. *Miramar* all feenish. You no make her float. No good."

Chenoweth shook his head impatiently. "I tell you, you'd die in that little boat. How can you row ninety miles in the sun without water? As for the *Miramar*, she is afloat. You do what I say and in thirty hours you'll be safe in San Lorenzo. You can hold out that long. You're not a damn bunch of babies, are you?"

Carlos seemed to take offense out of all proportion to the captain's words. He stepped close up to him, eyes gleaming angrily and big hands drawn up into fists.

"I show you if I damn baby. We take boat now and row for land. If you no like, you stay here, savvy?"

From a little distance Ramejas and Juan were watching intently, uncertain as yet of their course. Bill Johnson, too, stood aside, his face a perfect mask, while Carlos and the captain measured each other. Bill knew that Chenoweth's strength was peculiar, not the kind for lifting heavy weights but the kind that can bend an iron bar double with a quick spasmodic effort. However, even he was startled at the completeness of the sailor's collapse when the captain's fist lashed out suddenly against his jaw. It did not seem possible for anyone to fall so fast. The sharp smack of the blow had scarcely been heard when the big man was sprawled motionless on the sand.

Chenoweth stood for a moment, solicitously examining the knuckles of his right hand, then looked up.

"Anybody else like to have a try at being captain?" When it became evident that there was going to be no reply, he went on. "Just because I try to give my orders in a decent way, man to man, doesn't mean they're any less orders. I want that understood."

At this point Ramejas suddenly remembered that he, too, was an officer, and turned to the inoffensive Juan, who had been standing by, open mouthed.

"You mind what the captain tell you," he said severely. "We mus' all work together now."

Bill Johnson hid a smile not too successfully and walked away along the beach, Chenoweth following him.

"We'll give 'em a while to think things over, huh, Duke?" the engineer suggested in a low tone. "And then time we need

'em they'll be ready to work. You didn't hurt that feller much, did you?"

"I don't think so," replied the captain slowly. "I never yet hurt a man much by hitting him on the chin. I remember once, though, when I was second mate I got excited and hit a big Greek bos'n over the heart. He scared me all right. It was more than an hour before he came around."

At that Bill looked back anxiously over his shoulder, but saw Carlos already sitting up, and sighed with relief.

"No harm done this time, anyhow. I bet the big boy works harder'n any when we need him."

Chenoweth nodded. "It sometimes happens. In his kind it doesn't mean he's scared but simply that he's changed his mind. Nothing for us to do now but wait for high water. Be around sunset, I suppose. We'll finish the job by moonlight if it stays clear, if not, we'll finish it in the dark. We got a busy twelve hours ahead."

The next four hours, however, were anything but busy. Chenoweth found a stick, made a series of marks in the sand leading up from the water's edge, by which he could gage the tide, and sat down with Bill Johnson to wait. Their mouths and tongues were uncomfortably stiff and dry but there seemed to be no use in talking about it.

The mate and the two sailors remained at a little distance from them but the looks which they sent in their direction were curious now rather than mutinous. Even Carlos seemed to cherish no hard feeling.

As the afternoon advanced a light breeze sprang up from the north, ruffling the surface of the water and sending miniature breakers against the round back of the can buoy which had now drifted in much closer to the island. A line of dark cloud appeared on the windward horizon and the temperature began to drop long before sunset.

Chenoweth observed all this with growing excitement, becoming so nervous at times that he rose and paced in circles round and round the boat which still lay above the water line. Bill Johnson clung doggedly to his heels, not talking but steadying him just by being there.

At last when the tide reached its highest point they called the men over to help with launching the boat. All three came

this time, which was just as well for the surf was running a little more strongly and Carlos' powerful arms were needed.

Once outside the breakers, Chenoweth pulled on toward the *Miramar*, the ripples slapping smartly against the boat and occasionally tossing spray over the gunwales.

"We'd better try to swing her around and tow her in stern first, Bill," said the captain as he rowed. "We'll want her bow into the wind if it comes on to blow."

So, when the trip was done, Bill lay flat in the stern and made a line fast to the schooner's taffrail, two feet or more beneath the surface. Then Chenoweth turned his back toward shore and threw his weight against the oars. The *Miramar* was evidently still afloat, for she yielded gradually to the pressure, swung ponderously about and trailed after the boat.

The sea bottom sloped very evenly toward the island and the odd looking tow reached a point hardly a cable's length from the surf before the schooner's keel touched bottom. When it was certain that she could be moved no more, Chenoweth backed the boat to the taffrail again and Bill let go the towing line. Then they unfastened the stout halliards from the ends of the buoy and pulled it clear of the submerged deck, its work finished. The *Miramar* still rested on a fairly even keel, the roof of her cabin less than a foot under water, with light seas breaching over it as on a sunken reef.

Chenoweth rested on his oars and frowned. "If it breezes up too fast, we're finished. But if she'll only hold off until we can get clear of this lee shore, she can blow and be damned."

All the while they were working the afternoon light had been growing oddly heavy and brazen. Now the sun dipped behind a low bank of dun-colored cloud and a dull twilight fell suddenly.

"Hum," said Bill Johnson. "Don't look any too good. But it fiddles around a good while sometimes before it strikes. We goin' ashore again or wait here?"

"We're going to stay right here," replied Chenoweth decisively. "We want to find out how great the damage is as soon as we can. In a couple of hours we'll be able to get inside the cabin to get tools and oakum and so on, and the minute the water's low enough we'll start repairs."

"Right," agreed the engineer. "Let's

make fast to the end of the main boom there so we don't drift away. Tide and breeze against each other make all sorts of cross currents."

The boat rode easily at the end of her painter, pitching slightly in the swells which were still insignificant enough, while the chilly twilight deepened and stars came out overhead. The cloud banks on the horizon were higher and thicker than they had been, but as yet did not extend very far up the sky.

AFTER a long wait Bill Johnson sat up and stared intently into the darkness abaft the mainmast. The arch of the companionway had been out of water for some time and now the whole top of the cabin could be seen dimly, ripples slapping against it with a fresh, musical sound. The poop railing also had begun to emerge and as the moon sailed up above the cloud banks, its light made visible the dark running lanterns on the fore shrouds and the greater part of the jib boom, rising out of the sea in a long slant.

The men in the boat let go the painter then and pulled in to the taffrail. On a sudden impulse, Bill stepped up on a thwart and sprang over the rail to the schooner's poop, landing ankle deep in water. The cabin roof was several feet above the surface now and the room itself no more than half full of water, but the engineer did not attempt to go below. Instead he perched himself on the exposed roof and drew up his knees.

"You better make a trip over and get the men, Skipper," he suggested calmly. "You got room for 'em since I'm gone and I've got a notion that surf is easier to get through now than it will be for quite a while to come."

The captain nodded silently, swung the boat out from the rail and pulled away toward the dim beach of Teredo Cay.

When he returned, bringing the other castaways with him, he found the main-deck of the *Miramar* barely awash. Bill Johnson was thoroughly wet, having been down into the cabin after a hatchet with which he had knocked out a narrow plank in the forward bulkhead, allowing the penned up water to escape. As a result of his work, the cabin was now very nearly dry. The men left the small boat tied to

the taffrail and gathered uncertainly about the companionway. The moon was still very bright but scudding clouds were threatening every moment to blot it out and the need for a light was imperative.

Chenoweth thought a moment, then turned and went groping down the ladder into the cabin. The blackness there was impenetrable and everything water logged and clammy. Although he had spent only two days aboard the schooner, the captain remembered perfectly the arrangement of the furniture below and had no trouble in rescuing his match box from a drawer underneath his berth.

He had been soaked to the waist in taking the boat in and out through the surf, but his shirt was still partly dry, and, after wiping his hands carefully on it, he opened the cylindrical metal box. The matches inside were not even damp and when he scratched one on his thumb nail, an accomplishment which up to this time he had considered useless, it burned with a bright yellow flame.

By its brief light he opened a chest under the companion ladder which was used as a sort of carpenter's locker and took out a fat white candle. This he placed on the table in the middle of the floor and lighted with a second match. The candle flame wavered dizzily as the draught from the open companionway reached it, but did not seriously threaten to go out. Attracted by the yellow glow, Bill came ambling down the ladder.

"Gosh, Duke, this would make a good ad for those match box people. She was waterproof all right."

Chenoweth, burrowing again in the open chest, did not look up.

"She was," he replied. "But a candle's not much good to us. I got a lantern already and I know there's an unopened can of kerosene here somewhere. Ah, there you are."

He returned to the table with his finds and set them down beside the candle. Then he pulled off his shirt and set to work to wipe dry the various parts of the lantern. When this was done he opened the kerosene tin with the cork screw on his knife and carefully filled the tank. The wick, when lighted from the candle, sputtered weakly at first but soon settled to its business, and Chenoweth snapped down the globe with a satisfied grunt.

"Now we can see to work in that damn hold. All the tools we need are in that box except the hatchet and it's already on deck. Come on, catch a pocketful of nails, and let's go forward and see how things look. We'll take Juan along to help. He's dumb but at least he won't do anything you don't tell him to do. Also he made the hole and ought to know where it is."

Carlos, who, as it happened, had never heard of a waterproof match box, crossed himself surreptitiously when Chenoweth reappeared on deck carrying the lighted lantern, but he as well as the others was sufficiently eager to be shut of Teredo Cay to accept without protest a little satanic cooperation if the captain saw fit to invoke it.

The waves were hissing along the vessel's bow in lively fashion by this time and the moon was completely hidden beneath ragged clouds. There was a low murmur of wind through the shrouds that might rise at any moment to a shrill piping and the severed end of the main throat halliard slapped loosely against the mast. The tide was still falling very slowly, for it was almost slack water, but there was a little while yet to wait.

Chenoweth employed it in repairing the cut halliards on both masts, using long splices which would not jam in the blocks.

As the water dropped down about her sides and more of the schooner's weight rested on her keel she had begun to list to starboard and by the time Chenoweth finished his task the angle of her deck had become quite sharp.

Noticing this, the captain called Juan. "Which side did you cut that hole?" he demanded tensely. "Port or starboard?"

The sailor looked up placidly, his face in the lantern light being at the same time childish and inscrutable.

"Port side, *Capitano*. You come now, I show you where."

Chenoweth and Bill followed him to the open hatch amidships, where he slipped over the coaming without hesitation and disappeared below. Chenoweth passed the lantern down and descended after him, leaving the engineer waiting on deck.

In the narrow, pitch black hold, so low that a man's head scarcely cleared the deck beams, Juan and the captain stood still a moment, getting their bearings. The heavy boxes which contained the knocked

down airplanes had been lashed fast in their places and had not shifted or apparently taken any harm. The sea water, of which there was still a great deal present, had naturally collected on the lower side of the hold where its depth was upwards of four feet. On the port side, however, the edge of the level floor was less than a foot beneath the surface, and the top of the jagged opening in the outer hull, which Juan had made with the ax, could be seen dimly, the sea swirling in and out through it.

Chenoweth, finding the footing insecure, swung himself back to the deck, pulled off his shoes and returned barefooted. Then, taking the lantern from Juan, he made his way cautiously over to the side.

THE leak, when examined closely, proved to be less formidable than it had seemed. The wood was chipped and splintered over a considerable area but only one strake, perhaps six inches wide, was completely severed. The captain stayed a moment, fixing the exact situation in his mind, then returned perilously to the hatchway, passed up the lantern and scrambled back on deck, Juan following close behind him.

"Nothing to it, Bill," he exclaimed when he was on his feet again. "A good piece of board is all we need. There's one just right in that chest in the cabin. Bring it up and a plane and saw, will you? We can work right here if we don't slip off this damn deck."

When Bill returned with the tools and wood, Chenoweth took them and set to work, while Juan held the lantern. Using a corner of the hatch for a bench, he cut the board to the proper length, allowing for a generous overlap, and planed down the edges to fit roughly the curvature of the hull. The tools were rusty and hard to work with, but Chenoweth made up for their deficiencies with main strength and desperation.

When the patch was shaped at last, he set heavy nails about its edges and straightened up with a satisfied growl.

"That'll hold her for awhile. We got no time to lose, though. Tide'll start rising any time now. Get that caulking iron and some oakum, Bill, pronto. You know what I want and nobody else does. Candle's still burning in the cabin."

When the engineer had gone, Chenoweth hung on to the fore boom and stared out over the black water. The schooner lay barely outside the line of foaming surf, some of the larger swells breaking under her very quarters, and others, dashing against the bows, sweeping her fo'castle with spray. After his hard exertion, the captain found the wind bitterly cold and clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering as his wet trousers blew clammily against his legs.

The hull of the schooner lifted suddenly, as an unusually heavy swell surged under her, and ground violently on the shingle. Chenoweth was startled and snarled viciously. "Blow, damn your heart, blow!"

Then he shouted aft to Ramejas, who, having no orders, had remained with Carlos at the break of the poop.

"Mr. Ramejas, I want that port anchor run out ahead to hold her off shore. Can you and Carlos do it?"

The mate's voice came back, thin and doubtful. "I don' know, sir. She get pretty rough and anchor pretty heavy."

"Sure we do it, *Capitano*." Carlos' deep voice broke in with scant ceremony. It was the first time he had spoken for hours. "The mate give me hand to get her in the boat, I run her out myself."

"Go ahead, then," approved the captain briefly. "Stick out all the chain you can."

Bill Johnson reappeared suddenly with the caulking iron and oakum, so Chenoweth left Carlos to manage his own details and went back into the hold. Bill followed him cautiously, carrying the lantern. The water below was an inch or two higher than it had been, and, knowing that the tide was rising at last, Chenoweth forced the patch over the leak and nailed it fast, the blows of his hatchet sending spray flying clear across the hold. Then he drove threads of oakum into every crack and irregularity about the edges of the new piece. Any further leaking that took place would be unimportant.

As the two men slipped and slid back to the open hatchway, they could feel the hull shifting uneasily beneath their feet.

"It's up to Carlos now," said Chenoweth grimly. "If we don't get off this beach before it gets much rougher we'll have the whole bottom torn out of her."

Bill was busy at the moment getting on

deck with one arm full of tools, but when they were clear again he replied calmly.

"We'll get off all right, Duke. That boy Carlos knows his stuff."

They walked together up to the fo'castle head where the mate was standing uselessly. The port anchor was gone from its place on the bow and the rusty chain dangled idly from the hawsepipe.

"Boat get clear?" demanded the captain briefly.

Ramejas turned his head. "Yes, sir. He take so much chain that water run in over the stern. He make Juan go with him to tend chain and bail out water." The mate's high voice took on an aggrieved note. "He give all the orders while you below. He very insubordinate."

Chenoweth grunted. "Insubordinate is good. You wouldn't take the job. Hello! Here he comes back. We can take up the slack of that chain now."

The boat had appeared under the very bowsprit, phantomlike; now it turned and drove aft along the port side. Seeing it out of the way, the three officers bent to the windlass and heaved lustily. The dripping anchor chain rose out of the water slowly, grinding harshly in the hawsepipe, leading forward at a longer and longer slant. Carlos and Juan hoisted their boat to the stern davits and came forward quietly. When the chain would yield no more, Chenoweth straightened up.

"Good work, Carlos. Juan, too." He turned briefly to the mate who was puffing and blowing like a blackfish. "Mr. Ramejas, you go around and let go all the gaskets. Shake the water out of the sails and see that the running gear is clear. Take the lantern with you and make a good job. Bill, while we're waiting, see if that bilge pump is working. Maybe we can get some water out of the hold."

When they were gone the captain looked about anxiously. The anchor seemed to be holding well, for the *Miramar*, raised by the flooding tide, was almost afloat and had regained an even keel. She was dangerously low in the water, however, and still drove on the bottom from time to time with shivering violence.

On the main deck Ramejas' lantern was like a will o' the wisp in the windy darkness, stopping and starting erratically as he cleared foul lines or paused to dump sea water from the folds of the loosened sails.

Soon a dull clanking from the waist of the ship announced that Bill had succeeded in rigging the hand pump. After a few strokes the noise stopped and Bill's shadowy figure appeared again at the captain's elbow.

"Pump's all right, Duke. Shall I keep on workin' her or stay here?"

"Stick around, Bill. I'm going to need you. Juan, you go aft and take a turn at the pump. Keep it moving lively."

After a brief wait the white blur of the lantern came gingerly forward and Ramejas reported everything ready for making sail.

"Right," acknowledged Chenoweth. "We ought to have clearance enough in a few minutes now. Carlos—" He glanced at the other seaman, who stepped forward eagerly—"go aft and batten down that open hatch. Seas may be coming over any time."

This left only Chenoweth and Bill on the tiny fo'castle head.

"Get a hammer and stand by the anchor chain, Bill," directed the captain steadily. "When I give the word knock the pin out of that shackle and let her go. Ship can't pay off while the anchor holds her head in the wind. It's getting rough as the devil."

"I got that hatchet," replied the engineer briefly. "Hope to hell she ain't smashed her rudder."

The *Miramar* was clear afloat by this time, never touching bottom, but straining and lunging at her anchor chain like a terrified animal. The two men had hard work to keep their places in the bow.

"Don't think she has, Bill. Look out! Here she comes!"

A rush of wind drowned the feeble clank of the hand pump and a low wall of water raced over the starboard side, bursting in foam against the after cabin. The *Miramar* jerked and quivered violently at the shock, the men on the fo'castle head tumbling back as if swept by a giant hand to the foot of the foremast.

"Another like that'll have the anchor dragging," gasped Chenoweth hoarsely. His voice rose against the piping of the wind. "Ramejas, Carlos, stand by main halliards. Juan! Where the hell is Juan! Never mind that damn pump. Jib halliards on the run. All hands lively!"

The captain ran aft to the wheel while the others were taking their stations, then

his voice carried forward, loud and rough in the darkness. "Make sail!"

Above his head the big mainsail came suddenly to life, as Carlos and the mate heaved on the throat and peak halliards. The hoops were wet and all the gear stiff, but the canvas unfolded slowly, fluttering aloft like an enormous gray wing.

From the wheel Chenoweth watched anxiously.

"That's the way, boys. Your backs into it. She's coming. She's coming. No, to hell with it! Take her all the way. No time to tie reef points."

When the big sail lay flat at last he roared forward, "Back the jib to port. Let go your chain, Bill. Quick!"

A metallic clang sounded instantly from the fo'castle head, then Bill Johnson's steady voice. "All clear, sir."

Feeling sternway through the helm as the jib was forced out, the captain spun the wheel hard up. This caused the *Miramar's* head to fall off rapidly, the main boom swinging across the poop with a jerk.

"Main sheet, Carlos," cried Chenoweth as the sail filled out, "Forward there! Haul aft jib sheet. Jump, damn it, jump!"

At the captain's side the big, square figure of Carlos tended the main sheet skilfully, holding the great strain almost without effort. Away forward the dim gray triangle of the jib stiffened suddenly with wind.

The schooner, clear of her moorings, hung for an instant, poised on the crest of a wave, then swooped away to seaward, lurching and swaggering drunkenly. Chenoweth clung to the wheel desperately, for she was doing her utmost to jibe, and shouted more orders.

"Set fo's'l and outer jib. Double reef the fo's'l. Slack out that main sheet, Carlos. Handsomely. Hold her so."

As soon as she felt the additional weight of the forward canvas, the *Miramar* steadied down markedly, lying over until her starboard scuppers were under water, and driving ahead at high speed.

"Damn me," growled the captain under his breath, "if this isn't a ship."

The wind was hurling spray across the deck in stinging volleys, but the sea had not had time to rise to dangerous heights and conditions were right for the wildest kind of sailing. The *Miramar*, however, was running her lee gunwale under the

deeply for comfort, so when Juan and Ramejas came aft, drenched to the skin and shivering, Chenoweth luffed discreetly while they double reefed the mainsail also. After that she stood up better and was notably easier on the helm.

AS THE vessel settled to her swinging gait, the men gathered once more about the cabin companionway. Bill Johnson brought the precious lantern, which had been left out of the way inside the fo'castle during the rush, aft with him, and there was a general closing in upon it, in an overly optimistic desire for warmth.

"Take all hands below, Bill," ordered Chenoweth from the wheel, in a voice suddenly dry and thick. "See if you can get that oil stove working same way we did the lantern. Let 'em g-g-get warm."

The captain's body seemed amazingly slight in its wet cotton clothes as he stood by the wheel, but the men turned to look at him curiously as they filed below.

When they were gone Chenoweth held the same course, heading away from the shoals and reefs about Teredo Cay. As his navigation seemed likely to be sketchy for a while, he intended to keep to the open water that lay to the south and east.

The *Miramar* surged blindly on, not a light showing, and the captain clung to the wheel minute after minute, more acutely miserable than he had supposed a man could be. The wet and cold and weariness and the thirst that tormented him with wicked irony as water swirled about his feet and dashed into his face, combined in one endless torture. He lost track of time. Each second seemed an eternity.

Then the companion door swung open suddenly and an incredible breath of warm air swept over him. A broad, shadowy figure appeared at his side, in half dried oilskins, and Carlos' hoarse voice said, "I take her now, *Capitano*. You go below. Meesta Johnson feex stove good. I steer bees same course, eh?"

The sailor's hands were on the wheel between his own, so Chenoweth muttered billy, "Yes, steady's you go," and tumbled toward the companionway.

The next moment he landed in a heap on the cabin floor. His knees had bent all right at the head of the ladder but refused to stiffen up again.

Bill Johnson lifted him, his face anxious. "Gosh, Duke, yer all in, ain't yuh?"

Chenoweth struggled out of his hold and pulled himself to his feet, hanging on to the edge of the table.

"Hell, no! I'm all right. I slipped."

Bill did not seem inclined to argue the point. The oil stove was glowing yellowly in an after corner and the cabin was already fairly comfortable. Even outside, the temperature had not fallen really low, most of the captain's discomfort being caused by the high wind on his wet clothes, so, once under shelter, he recovered rapidly. A row of garments were, if not actually drying at least warming, on a line above the stove, steam rising from them in delicate, cheerful wisps.

After a few minutes, Chenoweth turned back toward the companionway.

"Let's get on deck again, men. We've got to change course." He went on in a lower tone to Bill. "We must be clear of those shoals by now. We'll steer a course that'll keep us clear and still take us in the right general direction until morning. I may be able to get the sun then. I got a notion this isn't going to be much more than a lively squall."

In fact, when they reached the deck again they found the wind already less violent and the blackness of the sky overhead broken by a patch of light where the shifting clouds covered the moon only thinly.

"You win, Duke," exclaimed Bill with satisfaction. "It's too late for hurricanes."

Chenoweth braced himself on the slanting poop, legs wide and stared into the darkness ahead.

"Take that binnacle lamp below, will you, Bill, and fix it up. We can't go on without using the compass. It's a long time to morning yet."

The compass itself, being watertight, was not damaged by its immersion and when the binnacle was lighted again, it was possible to make a much better course. A little later the moon sailed clear of the streaming clouds and Chenoweth ordered the wheel hard up. The *Miramar* turned easily, her sheets slacked far out, and ran southward before the wind.

Even though all danger seemed past, there was no sleep for anyone during the rest of the night. One man must stay constantly on lookout, another at the

wheel and, since there was still a great deal of water in the hold, still a third must be kept at the pump. The running lights must be cleaned and rigged and the man at the pump must be relieved at frequent intervals. Moreover, all bedding was oozing seawater and the bare, hard berths did not look inviting, even to exhausted men.

Gray dawn found the *Miramar* still romping southward, free and more buoyant as the water sank in her hold, making child's play of the stiff breeze which was all that remained of the night's squall. The crew, hollow eyed and silent, were all on deck, Juan now at the wheel, Ramejas wearily pumping and the others resting on the poop.

As the light increased, bringing every promise of a return to fine weather, Chenoweth slipped quietly below and the clicking of the key could be heard as he wound the chronometer, which, like the compass, was watertight and undamaged.

Presently he returned to the deck, carrying his sextant. The upper limb of the sun was already above the horizon and before the captain had finished wiping the vernier of his instrument and adjusting the mirrors, it flashed clear of the sea, climbing like a great golden ball up the sky.

Chenoweth called Bill Johnson. "Go down and take time for me, will you, Bill? I left the chronometer open."

The engineer nodded and ducked below. Chenoweth walked to the taffrail and raised the short telescope of the sextant to his eye. A light sea was running but the deck was remarkably steady and he went about taking the sight methodically.

The vernier felt along the tarnished arc in a hesitating manner, then the captain's fingers dropped to the set screw. It turned slowly—slowly. "Stand by!" His voice sounded in a sudden loud croak. The screw moved almost imperceptibly. "Time!" He lowered his arm carelessly and went back into the cabin.

ALMOST half an hour passed before he reappeared on the poop.

"Only forty miles to go," he growled to Carlos who had just taken the wheel. "Steer SSW from here."

Carlos mustered a weary grin and put the wheel over carefully.

"Steer SSW, sir."

Chenoweth cast a critical eye aloft, then

shouted with sudden vehemence, "Let's have the reefs out of those sails, bullies. And what's the matter with that main tops'l? Aloft you go, Juan, me boy, and hang it out. Shades of the *Flying Dutchman*! I may have been raised in steam, but I'm hell for carrying canvas. Lively, lads, lively!"

After an instant's bewildered hesitation, the men sprang to obey his orders and the *Miramar* drove ahead under her last inch of canvas. Still the captain frowned, unsatisfied.

"She's sailing like a mud turtle, boys. Wind right aft, too. Let her go wing and wing. Stick that fo's'l out to port when we spill the wind out of it. We'll make a *Flying Cloud* out of her yet. Luff, Carlos. Luff!"

After the schooner had filled away again, the great mainsail reaching far out over the starboard rail and the foresail almost as far to port, Chenoweth turned back to the helmsman.

"Watch her close, Carlos. She'll sail herself right under if she gets a chance, but we might as well not get there at all as to be an hour too late." He chuckled dryly. "Guess those two thought I was crazy, the way I gave those last orders. Always makes me tired to hear people say a man can't handle sail unless he's been twenty years in square riggers. I may do a lot of things wrong, but damned if we're not getting where we're going."

The big sailor raised his eyes from the compass. "Yes, sir, we get there, but I tink no man do it but you."

"All of us did it, Carlos. You and Mr. Johnson did more than your shares, too. But, between ourselves, speaking of Bill, I think he's gone all adrift. I wasn't paying much attention to him below just now, but I could see he was fooling around with a tea kettle and a sheet of tin. If he makes tea out of salt water, don't drink any. It'll make you sick."

At that moment Bill's head appeared in the companionway.

"Say, Duke, come below a minute, can you? Got something to show you."

Chenoweth winked surreptitiously at Carlos and followed the engineer down into the cabin. When they were safely out of sight, Bill brought out an enamel cup with nearly an inch of clear liquid in the bottom.

"Want a drink o' water, Duke?" he enquired with elaborate casualness.

The captain glared suspiciously. "Don't kid me, Bill. It'd be a joke if it wasn't so damn serious."

"Ain't kiddin' yuh. I just had a drink myself. It's condensed tea kettle steam if yuh want to know. Flavor ain't so much but it's fresh water."

Chenoweth raised the cup, stared down into it, licked his lips with a tongue already swollen and tasted the water. There was an odd, suspended instant, then he gasped shudderingly and tilted the cup. He had taken scarcely a mouthful when he lowered it again and groaned.

"Bill, I've got to split this with the rest. I don't want to, but I've got to. Damn it, man. I've got to."

"Now, now," said Bill soothingly. "There's no necessity for being a ruddy hero. I got an exact same and equal amount for each of the others and I can get more. It's slow work, though, and I want 'em to come down one at a time to get it. Savvy?"

But Chenoweth had buried his nose in the cup again before he was half through speaking, and did not come up to reply.

Later, after everyone had had a turn at Bill's rough and ready condenser, the captain called the men to open the hatch amidships.

"I want those planes out on deck in the sun," he said. "I'm scared their wings'll warp."

By means of a tackle rigged from the mainstay the heavy cases were raised out of the hold, which was still remarkably wet, and laid in a row on the deck. The engines of the fast little scouts were coated with pounds of grease and were entirely undamaged. The wings and fuselages, too, when carefully drained and wiped, seemed to be in good condition. In the warm sunlight, which had apparently returned to stay, they were soon thoroughly dry, and, to the eye at least, not warped at all.

The *Miramar* was sailing easily now, her wings spread like a giant sea bird before the light wind and the blue sea ruffling gently to the horizon. Chenoweth turned suddenly and drove his thumb into Bill Johnson's ribs.

"The planes aren't hurt, old kid, and we'll be in port by noon. What do you think of that?"

Bill grunted at the impact and blinked rapidly. "Damned if I know, Duke. What do you think of it?"

THREE hours later, just before what Chenoweth called "local apparent noon," Juan ambled aft from the fo'castle head where he had been sitting lookout, and reported that land was in sight.

The fore and mainsails, rigged as they were, completely blinded the poop, so Chenoweth took his binoculars and followed the sailor up to the bow. Even to the naked eye the hills of San Lorenzo were plainly visible, a line of incredibly delicate violet along the horizon, and when the captain raised his glasses the mist cleared away before them, revealing the tall shaft of the light house on Toro Point at the entrance to the harbor.

The *Miramar's* course needed to be altered very little to bring her in. The breeze had decreased gradually until now it was just breathing and the vessel's speed was correspondingly low, but Bill Johnson reported the auxiliary engine hopeless, due to ruined batteries, and there was nothing to do but be patient. The men themselves were not in bad shape, all things considered. Bill's condenser had been working steadily, if tediously, all morning, and Ramejas, poking dejectedly about the lazarette, had come across two cans of peaches and one of peas, which, with hard-tack, had supplied them with their first meal in forty hours.

Under the warm midday sun, in dry clothes, with a certain amount of food and water stowed away, the abject misery of twelve hours before seemed unreal as a nightmare. Bill had even spread a handful of tobacco on the cabin roof in the sunshine and soon all hands, including the man at the wheel, were puffing their pipes again.

The schooner dipped leisurely along through a sea that had faded from sapphire to turquoise, and presently Chenoweth noticed that the hills ahead were green and brown, rugged and sharply defined instead of the ineffable violet they had first appeared.

He rose from the edge of the cabin roof where he had been sitting and glanced into the compass. "Port half a point," he directed the helmsman, "and we'll go in on that one course. Channel's right ahead."

As the *Miramar* drew nearer the shore, Chenoweth ordered the foresail shifted to starboard again, so the helmsman could see the battered spar buoys that marked the channel, and himself hoisted the blue and white ensign of San Lorenzo at the main gaff.

The fortress on the opposite side of the harbor from the lighthouse loomed darker and higher, with its sloping, dun colored walls and rows of gun embrasures bearing directly upon the schooner. The gay ensign of the Federals still drooped from a staff on the battlements, however, and there were no signs of any recent fighting.

Beyond the castle the little capital dozed in the hot, white light; narrow streets, lined with high balconied, unsubstantial houses and shops, leading up from the harbor, occasional flashes of colored tile or galvanized iron roofs, and a general air of dust and tranquility.

As the *Miramar* slipped in beneath the walls of the castle, it became evident that she had been recognized some time before, for a group of uniformed men were waiting on the landing stage. When she had rounded to and her sails came fluttering down, a launch put out at once.

The captain and engineer watched from the rail amidships.

"Believe that's Don Jaime in the stern of that boat, Duke," said Bill interestedly. "Wonder if he's expecting to find you and me on board."

The questions answered themselves a minute later when the launch eased in to the side, with a gentle crunching of fenders, and the tall man who had been sitting in the sternsheets rose and swung aboard the schooner. Tall, dark and splendid in the white uniform of a cavalry officer, he looked no older than the two seamen who stepped forward to meet him.

The soldier's face was radiant.

"We thought you lost," he exclaimed intensely. "We had given up hope for you and for ourselves. Now you are here with your cargo safe. I watched you coming in, fearing to believe my eyes."

Chenoweth laughed. "It's good to see you again, Don Jaime. We haven't forgotten that little war last summer. You know you can figure on us. But why give us up when we're only thirty-six hours overdue?"

Don Jaime shook his head in perplexity.

"There is a mystery. General Rosalva delivered his ultimatum yesterday—a demand for complete surrender. He sent with it the log of the *Miramar* and an airplane photograph of her on the bottom, only masts showing. The log book was most convincing and he had other information to prove that his men had captured the ship and sunk her. He told us the crew had betrayed the ship and joined the rebel army. This we did not believe, but we feared you lost or prisoners. But now—now you shall tell me if you can how he counterfeited your log and found out so much about your voyage."

Chenoweth and Bill grinned at each other. "He didn't counterfeit that log, that's the funny part of it, Don Jaime," said the captain dryly. "But it makes a story. Come over here and sit down on the cabin roof and I'll tell you about it."

"Gladly," agreed the commandant. "But in the meantime I shall have the vessel shifted over to the landing stage. Those airplanes must be ready to fly before tonight."

He called several orders to a young lieutenant who had remained with half a dozen men in the launch alongside, and then followed the captain aft.

By the time Chenoweth finished his account of the past two days, the *Miramar* was safely tied up to the shore and the last of her precious cargo had disappeared into the lower level of the castle.

Don Jaime sat perfectly still for a full minute, then rose slowly to his feet. "It is like a miracle. Once more you have saved San Lorenzo. Rosalva's army is almost ready to begin a siege. He plans to bomb the city each night until we surrender. Tonight it is to begin. What a surprise for the insurrectos! Now we shall be ready." He hesitated a moment and a note of concern came into his voice. "But you have suffered. This José Hidalgo. I have never heard of him, but the man who sent him to you in Havana shall hear of him again. It is bungling of that sort that destroys nations."

Bill Johnson, who had been listening in silence, grinned wearily. "Say, Don Jaime, old scout, that's all right about the fate of empires, but how about a square meal and a flop for me and Duke and the rest of our gang. We ain't had no luxuries in quite a while."

It was in this way that two merchant seamen with very deficient wardrobes came to dine delightfully and later occupy blissfully a fine four poster bed in the commandant's own quarters in the castle of San Lorenzo, certainly the first time such a thing had happened since the Spanish conquistadores built the fortress three hundred and fifty years before. The schooner's crew, also, was well provided for, and soon all, without regard for rank or precedence, were fast asleep.

AFTER a long time, when the light from the high window in the commandant's bedroom had softened to dusky gold, someone rapped loudly on the door. Chenoweth stirred uneasily and when the knock was repeated awoke with a start.

"Come in," he called.

A very young officer, the same who had come out to the *Miramar* with Don Jaime, entered precipitately. He was evidently suppressing wild excitement under a military bearing.

"The attack is beginning, señors. Rosalva's planes are in sight. The commandant left orders for you to be called now." The boy's teeth flashed in a joyful grin. "He thought you might like to watch the victory."

Chenoweth and Bill sat up together. "Damn right we would," replied the engineer, who had waked in time to hear most of the news. "Where's my pants?"

A half minute later the two seamen were following the officer up a succession of flights of narrow stone steps between the different levels of the ancient castle. At last, coming out through a small guard tower which clung to an extreme corner of the battlements, they found themselves on the open roof. The great, square tiles underfoot were stained and blackened with age and a row of antique Spanish mortars, elaborately ornamented with coats of arms and lions heads in bas relief, still turned with yawning mouths toward the sea, awaiting the English galleons and pirate pinnaces that would never come again. In the middle of the roof, however, stood a large, unromantic water tank, while the signal mast on the seaward battlement was of the very latest type.

The sun was sinking behind the wooded mountains to the westward, the sky flam-

ing orange above, shading away to faint saffron and blue, while the limitless turquoise of the Caribbean was just beginning to be washed with gray. It appeared that the men on the castle roof were not interested for the moment in scenery.

"There! See! There they are!" The young lieutenant pointed out over the western battlements toward three airplanes, heading in V-formation straight for the city, the undulating roar of their motors loud in the drowsy air.

"Say," exclaimed Bill suddenly. "Maybe this roof ain't goin' to be so healthy in a minute or two."

The last of his words were almost lost in a new uproar that broke out under the very walls of the fortress. The men reached the opposite battlement in time to see a little pursuit plane dart out along the sea beach below them, black and grotesquely insect like against the sand, take the air and swing out over the sea in a quick turn. It was a Thomas Morse Scout. Back it came at terrific speed, straight for the wall of the castle, zoomed over the roof in a breath taking hurdle, and was gone to meet the enemy flight. Two more scouts followed in rapid succession, the angry buzz of their rotary motors sharp and high above the drone of the seaplanes. The lieutenant was fairly dancing in his excitement.

"Now you shall see! Now! Now!"

Sharp against the evening sky the big seaplanes, their pilots completely surprised, banked and scattered in panic stricken retreat before the Federal scouts. Then, one of the invaders lowered his nose and started down in a long glide. The idea must have seemed good to his two companions for they immediately dived after him.

The three planes landed near the castle, one in the harbor itself, the others close outside. As they lay idle on the water, the men at the battlement could see their crews come climbing out of the cockpits to stand with raised hands on the wide pontoons.

"Carramba damn!" exclaimed the lieutenant in disgust. "A surrender! Better to shoot them down. But I must go and send the launch to bring them in." He smiled apologetically. "I am the only officer here. The rest have gone with the general, Don Jaime, to make a surprise

attack on the rebel positions. We drew lots to see who should remain. My accursed luck!"

He turned on his heel and disappeared down the narrow stairway.

The three scout planes, meanwhile, had been circling above the harbor, but now they straightened out and flew westward in line. All at once a rattling of rifle and machine-gun fire sounded from the same direction and the planes dived in quick succession, flattening out at last barely clear of the tree tops. They banked, climbing steeply and repeated the maneuver. Then the firing ceased as abruptly as it had begun and the little scouts soared away in a wide arc. They circled cautiously once or twice, as though reluctant to leave the field, then straightened out again and headed home through the gathering dusk.

Bill Johnson bowed low as they roared overhead, while Chenoweth thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets and gazed after them respectfully.

"Those fellows are fighters, Bill. Worth the trouble we took to get 'em their busses."

"Reckon so, Duke," murmured the engineer absently, staring down over the battlement. "Reckon so."

The beach at the side of the castle was narrow and shelving but all three of the Federal planes made safe landings and were hauled up to level ground by squads of amateur mechanics.

Bill and Chenoweth looked at each other rather dazedly. Now that the airplane engines were silent, they could hear for the first time the splashing of waves about the base of the fortress, eighty feet below, and the gentle murmur of surf on the beach beyond. The sounds were cool and monotonous in the still twilight.

Only a faint, rosy stain remained in the western sky and the lantern of the great lighthouse on the opposite point winked steadily out to sea, the red danger sector gleaming weirdly on their faces. Between them and the light a strange procession was creeping in toward the landing stage. It was the launch which had brought Don Jaime out to the *Miramar*, a powerful, deep gunwaled craft, chugging along in determined fashion, towing astern the three enemy sea planes, fastened together with their mooring lines, the pilots and observers prisoners aboard the launch. It

was very ignominious and a little pitiful.

The two men on the castle roof turned away from the battlement on a common impulse and walked toward the stairway.

"SHOW'S over, Duke. We better get below or a malaria skeeter'll be chewin' on us."

A little while later Don Jaime came into the commandant's office where the two seamen were philosophically smoking his best cigars, while they waited for him. The officer did not seem particularly triumphant, his manner being rather that of a man who has performed a distasteful task well and is glad to have it over. Bill and Chenoweth rose to greet him.

"Everything all right, Don Jaime?" This was the engineer speaking.

The general tossed his gloves carelessly on the desk and shrugged.

"There was no battle. They expected no attack and when we charged after our planes had machine-gunned their lines, they surrendered with hardly a shot. The air attack and the failure of their own planes demoralized them hopelessly. Rosalva does nothing but curse."

"Rosalva?" broke in Chenoweth interestedly. "Did you take Rosalva himself?"

"We did. We took the entire army." Don Jaime smiled a little wryly. "It was not so large as we had been led to believe."

"What are you going to do with him, Don Jaime?"

The officer shrugged again. "We shall have to keep him in quod. That is what you say, is it not? English? Perhaps I heard it from one of the aviators. Hoosegow will do just as well. We shall give him a comfortable cell in which he can write his memoirs if he so desires, or a history of the world. He will have ample time for both. Yes, gentlemen," Don Jaime concluded thoughtfully, "when San Lorenzo has need of you again it will be for some other reason than General Rosalva's misbehavior."

"Whatever the reason is," said Chenoweth slowly, "if she needs us we'll come. We're going back to the United States now, but we shan't forget—San Lorenzo."

"Your service," went on the general, "has been too great for words and we shall not offer money, but we have thought it might be fitting if you would accept the little schooner you saved for us, the *Mira-*

mar, as a token of gratitude from—" he paused a moment as Chenoweth had done, smiling faintly—"San Lorenzo."

Bill Johnson raised a hand to his bristling red hair and looked pensive. "Reckon me and you can sail her home, Duke?"

"I reckon so, Bill."

Then the engineer grinned companionably at General Don Jaime de Morgante y Calavera, whose father chanced to be president of the Republic of San Lorenzo.

"Thanks, Don Jaime. She's a nice little bateau."

Late the following afternoon the *Miramar* cast off her lines from shore and slipped out into the channel under her own power. She had been completely overhauled during the night by a gang of special riggers, and now with her straight bowsprit, light fore and main topmasts and

glistening decks, her yacht like lines showed to advantage for the first time. The engine was sputtering cheerfully again and from an ensign staff at the stern fluttered a new American flag.

As she rippled past in the shadow of the grim fortress on the point, only the man at the wheel, a slender fellow in immaculate white duck, could be seen by the officers gathered on a balcony to wave farewell.

Presently, however, when the little vessel turned her bow into the open sea and began to draw away to the northward, they saw another man, lean, red haired, his new singlet already smeared with grease, come up from the engine room and stand at the taffrail, looking back, his hands clasped above his head in the old gesture of the prize ring.



*Concluding a Romance
of the South Seas' Enchantment*

The Dangerous Isles

By BASIL CAREY

Preceding events briefly retold

For three days Morgan and Pettigrew, partners in a pearling expedition, had awaited the arrival of their other partner, Donovan, in his boat the *Spindrift*. They had sailed in the *Anna* to pick up divers and here, southwest of Amanu, Donovan was to have joined them with the stores and a chart of the island Taukura. Donovan had stumbled upon this island accidentally, found it had never been pearled, and made a chart showing its location and approach among the Dangerous Isles of the Southern Pacific.

Growing impatient at Donovan's tardiness, and each secretly worried because of it, they put about and made for Wakatea, the port where Donovan took on stores, hoping to pick him up on the way. They find his boat scuttled but kept awash by a ledge on which it had drifted. Donovan is in the deckhouse, knifed, a gold earring in his fingers. The chart is gone.

Pettigrew admits to Morgan that while lost at Wakatea he mentioned he was going pearling on Taukura with Donovan. He had babbled this information while in his cups. They both feel sure that the only ones capable of attacking Donovan and stealing the chart are Stewart and his partner Lamotte—the latter they remember wears earrings much like that found clutched in Donovan's hand.

They go to Wakatea and get fresh supplies. Here their suspicions of Stewart are further confirmed. They find he sailed immediately after Donovan did and that he knew Donovan had a chart of Taukura. They also learn that Stewart and Lamotte headed for Kikia where they were to meet the latter's sister who was to arrive on the Tahiti mail boat. Morgan and Pettigrew

sail with all haste to intercept Stewart. They arrive at Kikia and demand an explanation from Stewart but get no satisfaction. Lamotte, however, is plainly nervous and has a torn ear, which he claims to have received in a fight. With so little evidence they cannot drag Stewart and Lamotte into court, but plan to follow them. If Stewart goes to Taukura it will show them the way—which they cannot find without Donovan's chart—and also prove that Stewart has the chart. Thus they hope to find the secret pearling ground and Donovan's murderer at the same time.

Stewart, fearing this, has a native waylay Morgan and Pettigrew and keep them doped for two days after he, Lamotte, and Lamotte's sister, Valerie, have sailed.

Valerie is fresh from New York and knows nothing of Stewart nor of her brother's participation in any wrong doing.

Stewart, Lamotte and Valerie, with Donovan's chart, reach Taukura unhindered by Morgan and Pettigrew. After a week's fishing they leave with some very fine pearls. Stewart has paid Valerie much attention and she is attracted by him.

Morgan and Pettigrew, feeling certain that Stewart will sell any pearls he may get at Taukura to Chang, lay off Paviete to intercept the *Swallow*. They finally sight her and make a night attack, boarding the *Swallow* from their longboat. During the confused fighting Pettigrew steals below and finds Valerie with Stewart's belt, containing the pearls, about her. They squabble, the light is knocked down and Valerie finally gets to the deck where Pettigrew catches her. Unable to unclasp the complicated buckle of the belt and



afraid of interference by others, Pettigrew grabs her and jumps overboard. They are picked up by Morgan in the longboat and taken on board the *Anna*. The pearls are taken from Valerie and the *Anna* heads northward for Kikia where they intend to put Valerie ashore. During the fight the *Swallow's* steering gear was put out of commission so Morgan and Pettigrew feel safe from pursuit.

A squall hits the *Anna*, before they can take in sail or cut the halyards, she is dismasted. Some of the crew are washed overboard—Pettigrew is nowhere to be seen—the boat appears to be sinking. Morgan takes Valerie and puts out in the longboat.

The rising sun finds them both huddled in the bottom of the boat.

Farther north a fantastic hulk pitches and rolls alarmingly, wringing heartfelt curses from her steersman.

After drifting two days in the longboat Morgan and Valerie sight Paviete. They swim ashore landing on the seaward side of the island.

While the castaways are crossing Paviete to reach the harbor side where Chang lives, Stewart and Lamotte have paid Chang a brief visit to mend their steering gear. They inform him of the disappearance of Valerie and the pearls. They leave Paviete to try to find the *Anna* and recover the pearls, promising Chang to return with the pearls and sell them to him.

Morgan and Valerie reach Chang shortly after Stewart's departure. The Oriental receives them with all courtesy, but during their first night under his roof robs Morgan of the pearls. Morgan accuses him of the theft and starts a fight.

Chang's servants overcome Morgan and lock him up. Valerie is left unharmed as a plaything for Chang.

Ah Foo, a servant of Chang's, secretly hates his master and on Morgan's arrival has surreptitiously sent a native catamaran to overtake Stewart with the news. Because of the light breeze the natives catch up with the *Swallow* and Stewart turns back toward Paviete.

Stewart and Lamotte return to Paviete and accuse Chang of having the pearls. He denies all knowledge of them. Stewart gets a signal from Ah Foo signifying that the pearls are on Chang's person. He attacks Chang. They fight—Chang with his knife, Stewart with his hands. Stewart finally disarms Chang and chokes him to death. He recovers the pearls, releases Valerie and they sail away in haste to avoid meeting Barton, captain of the local trading schooner which is overdue at Paviete.

Barton arrives, investigates Chang's death, learns that Stewart killed him and that Morgan is being held a prisoner. He releases Morgan and takes him on board the schooner.

While these events are happening on Paviete, Pettigrew managed to keep the *Anna* afloat and get a tow into Wakatea. Here he has the *Anna* re-rigged.

Barton lands Morgan at Wakatea. Both Pettigrew and Morgan are greatly surprised, each believing the other to be dead. They decide to start at once to try and overtake the *Swallow* before she quits the South Seas for Honolulu; at which port they feel certain Stewart will leave the *Swallow*, going on to New York to find the best market for the pearls.

BILL MOSES had guessed right. Stewart was making for Kikia with all the speed that the *Swallow* could muster. He and Lamotte landed on the island at midday under a blistering sun. The air was strangely still and Kikia lay torpid, sweltering in the heat. One figure only came down to the water's edge to greet them. It was Pereira, dried up as ever. He shambled towards them with his ape-like gait. No ghost of expression flitted across his wizened face.

"We're not staying," Stewart told him. "Just looked in for stores, and we're away north. Jake asleep? Well, he'll be awake enough inside ten minutes. Time's flying."

They went up the beach to the silent store. Jake was sound asleep with a newspaper over his face. Stewart woke him and soon had the rat-like little man scurrying to and fro. Kaoha and another boy trudged backwards and forwards. The sweat streamed from their bodies until a faint steam rose from the glistening skin. Having given his orders Stewart called for drinks. But conversation was difficult, hampered by the huge uneasy presence of Lamotte. Stewart, impatient at the hindrance, managed to catch Jake's eye.

"Mr. Lamotte," said Jake, "I'd like your opinion of these canned goods. Seems to me they're all right. Here, what do you make of this one?"

"Well?" said Stewart as Lamotte rose and followed Jake to the far end of the store, "how did you fix it with those two?"

"I use da hypodermic," said Pereira. "How Morgan can fight! It was hard work but Kila and I, we quiet them at last. Two days they lie still. After that, I throw them outside. And you—you get what you went for?"

Stewart nodded.

"Yes."

"Where are those two now?"

"Couldn't say. I reckon they're dead. But I never believe a man's dead in these parts until I see the corpse. It's not likely they're living, but they might be. Don't think Morgan stood much chance. Chang got him shut up in Paviete."

"Chang very clever man," said Pereira. "Well, alive or dead, you don't know. But you think they might live, eh? Else why you make haste north?"

"H'm," said Stewart, a little taken back at Pereira's acuteness, "well, yes, I've got a

sneaking suspicion that Morgan's still drawing breath."

"You got pearls all right?"

"Yes."

"Let me see," demanded Pereira.

For a moment Stewart hesitated. Then pride of possession caught him and he nodded.

"Very well. But not here."

Pereira rose and went to the door. Stewart followed him, shouting to Jake that he would be back directly. They went out into the blazing sunlight, down the uneven path that was the town's main street. Every house was shuttered against the heat. Not a soul moved. They halted at the door of Pereira's hut and plunged gratefully into the cool dimness of the interior. Stewart flung off his coat. His shirt was wet through and it clung about his chest and shoulders. He wiped his neck and face and ran a hand through his damp hair. At the sound of glasses he looked up.

"Taste good, eh?" said Pereira watching him critically. "Pink gin, she is. So they call her in Lagos. You know Lagos? Damn bad place, nothing good I fin' there but only da pink gin. It is angosturas dat give da kick. You can taste?"

He brought forward a small oval table, of antique design. It was made of oak and highly polished. Very carefully Stewart laid out the pearls, one by one, on a strip of cloth that Pereira took out of a drawer. For a long time both men stood silent, absorbed by the beauty of the things they beheld. Apart from the rest, alone in its pride, lay the Queen of Taukura, flawless, immaculate, the perfection of loveliness.

"Where?" murmured Pereira at last.

"New York. That one alone is worth the journey. If Rosenbaum won't buy it at my price, Garstein will. They'll be at each other's throats over it."

"By Honolulu?"

"Yes. But, see here, I want it kept quiet. That's why I came back by Johnson Island and not Wakatea. There are quite a number of folks who'd like to relieve me of those same pearls. How do such things get about? I don't know. Barton knows about them for one. Never mind how, but he does know."

"Which way shall you go?"

"St. Joseph Island way, keeping east of the current. It's quicker."

"St. Joseph a nasty spot," said Pereira.

"Las' year Finnen lose his boat there. You look out if you go St. Joseph way."

Suddenly he held out his hand.

"You owe me for helping you with Morgan and Pettigrew," he said. "No," as Stewart's hand went to his pocket. "No, you can keep dollars. For what I did you can, give me some one of these."

His gnarled hand hovered over the pearls like the talon of some bird of prey about to swoop. Stewart shook his head.

"No. You're not going to have them, any of them. I'll pay you the price we fixed. Either that or nothing."

There was a strange glint in the old eyes as Pereira's hand drew back.

"I want it," he said, in a high excited voice. "You give me a share of da pearls. It is my right. But for me you would not have reach Taukura. It was I who made it possible. If I had not fought those two, what would you have done? It is my right."

"No," said Stewart again. "You did your part all right and you'll be well paid. But have any of those pearls you will not. They're mine."

They faced each other angrily.

"Why not?" persisted Pereira. "Why not?"

Stewart did not answer. He was wrapping the pearls again, hurriedly, hiding them from the sudden clutch of those brown hands. Pereira drew back, muttering, and for a moment Stewart thought he was going to spring. He braced himself to meet the attack, but it did not come. Pereira walked away to the window, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Scowling he stood there with his broad back towards Stewart. Why should he ask for one of those pearls? mused Stewart. Was it possible that the same fever burned in the veins of both of them? . . . There seemed nothing left to do except go. Stewart turned to the door. He hesitated and came back again. In his hand was a wad of bills.

"Pereira."

"Well?"

"Here, your pay."

Pereira took it and counted each separate piece of paper with maddening deliberation.

"It's all right, isn't it?" said Stewart impatiently.

"Yes, all right."

"You don't seem well pleased. Still banking after the pearls?"

"Give me one," Pereira implored. "Only one—I want it—I want it—"

The words poured from his lips in a queer cascade of sound. Stewart listened in bewilderment. The old man's hands were clasped in supplication. For the first time Stewart realized that Pereira had a soul. But he shook his head firmly. In desperation Pereira seized the sheaf of bills. He thrust them into Stewart's face.

"I give back," he was saying incoherently, "I give back—for just that one pearl."

"No," said Stewart finally, "no. You can keep your monkey-hands off the pearls. Cut it right out, Pereira. I don't care what you want it for. You won't get it."

He turned on his heel and went out into the burning noon. Striding back to Jake's he came upon Kaoha, staggering to the boat with a last load.

"That all?"

"All, Tuarti."

"Lamotte?"

"Lamotte he get drunk along Yake."

"He's not getting drunk, you fool. We're not staying long enough. You go find Lamotte tell him come quick; tell Lamotte pay Yake and come damn quick. Here."

He counted out some bills into the moist palm.

"No stay, Tuarti?" asked Kaoha wistfully.

"No."

HE WALKED impatiently up and down until Lamotte appeared.

"Come on. What have you been doing? Did you pay Jake? What's he charging for all that stuff in the green cans? How much? Damned swindler, then. I'll bet he's worked off a lot of junk on us because he knew we were in a hurry."

"You are in a bad temper," remarked Lamotte. "What's the trouble? Pereira wants too much, eh?"

"He wanted a damn sight more than he got," retorted Stewart. "What do you think he asked me for? The Queen of Taukura. Yes, he did. Told me why he wanted it. You'd never guess. He's got an old crucifix and there's a place under the feet where a pearl used to be. He wanted to fit the Queen of Taukura into that. Can you beat it? Pereira and a crucifix!"

He frowned.

"And he said a queer thing. While he was begging and praying he said, 'You've taken the pearls from the hand of a dead

man. They will bring you no luck.'"

"I knew it," said Lamotte. "I tell you, I'm getting sick of it all. What have they brought us but bad luck? The sooner we sell them the better. We will get away to Honolulu as soon as we can, and catch the American boat. As soon as I can leave Valerie at Amanu—Mrs. Parsons there is my friend and she will look after her—"

"What?"

"You heard me. Valerie stays here. When we return from America, I will take her away myself."

"What's the idea?" demanded Stewart.

"Why have you suddenly planned to leave her at Amanu?"

Lamotte turned on him.

"Because of you. You will have it and so I tell you. Before she was lost on Paviete, I knew it. Now that she is with us again, I know it too. You undress her with your eyes. *Dieu*, but I could kill you for the way you look at her! I've seen you look that way at other women. Always it ends in the same thing. But not this time. At first I think she was fascinated, flattered. But now, she hates you."

"It's a lie."

"It's the truth. You shall not touch her."

Little drops of sweat stood on his forehead. He was in deadly earnest.

"So we're putting in at Amanu," commented Stewart smoothly. "Very well. If you've planned to leave Valerie there, all right. And after we've taken her up to Mrs. Parsons," his voice changed, "we'll take a stroll round the island. There's some interesting places on Amanu. The gaol, for instance. Do you know the governor? I do. He's called Westworth. Yes. He's a friend of mine. I'll introduce you. Mr. Westworth, I'd like you to meet Paul Lamartine—"

"*Dieu*, you would—"

"Paul Lamartine, the celebrated forger, wanted in Paris, Lyons, and Toulon."

There was a breathless pause. Then a choked sound came from Lamotte. Stewart knew he had won.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Stewart had gone Pereira turned to the room again. Swiftly he went to a chest and unlocked it. Plunging his hand surely into its depths he lifted out something and stood looking

at it, while reverence fought back the anger that Stewart's refusal had lit in his eyes.

It was a crucifix, made in Spain in the sixteenth century. To Pereira it meant God. For him the tortured Christ was real. In adoration of this sorrowful beauty his whole religion began and ended. The thing was exquisite, carved by a master hand. The collectors of two continents had searched anxiously since the day eighteen years before when it had disappeared. Minute descriptions of it had appeared in the leading art journals. Learned men had argued the symbolism of the pearl on which the feet rested. There was intense excitement when this pearl was discovered in a New York dealer's. No doubt about its being the right one, they said. The marks of the golden claws which had held it in place were distinctly visible. But the crucifix itself remained undiscovered. It was called "The Crucifix of the Inquisition."

The legend was that the anguished face had been copied from a prisoner of the Holy Office. All the idealism, the dim confused yearning after higher things, that lurked in the warped soul of Pereira, was centred on the symbol that lay in his hands. It was his dream to replace the pearl on which those weary feet had rested. Yet none had been found worthy. With the decline of pearling and the increasing scarcity, his task was no easy one. But that day he had seen the pearl of pearls, the Queen of Tauru, and in his heart desire was born. He had been prepared to pay any amount that Stewart cared to ask. Fight for it he would not. He had the thief's superstition concerning the curse brought by jewels taken by violence.

The fury he had felt at Stewart's refusal burned down into a dull smoldering hatred. He stood a long time at the little window that commanded the beach road. It was late afternoon when he went out again and made his way to Jake's. There he sat in a corner, moody and taciturn, deaf to the noise around him. McCarthy of the *White Lady* was in from Amanu, fresh with a tale of a skulking schooner suspected of being a rum runner. He had hailed her, but she slunk out of sight, running guiltily to south-east with a hunted air. Even Jake stopped to listen, standing absorbed with a half polished glass in his hand. Pereira paid no attention. He did not see the small room, blue with the murk of smoke-haze from

eking pipes. Before him was a face, the face of Stewart looking up at him sharply, suspiciously. The rage which was in him began to burn again. Who was Stewart to deny him what he asked, Rat Stewart? If Pereira chose, he could—he could—well, what could he do? Why, there was that affair of the killing at Tahiti, or the matter of the planter on Johnson Island, or even the tale that Stewart had told him of Donovan. If Stewart were out of the way, he might stand a chance of gaining the Queen of Taikura. Lamotte—oh, doubtless Lamotte would sell at a price. Lamotte was a fool, anyway. Show a fool money enough and he will sell you his hopes of heaven. There would be little difficulty with Lamotte. But Stewart. . . .

There was a slight commotion at the door. Men were looking over each other's shoulders and stretching to get a good view of something that was happening. Languidly Pereira followed their gaze. It was sunset and across the reddening water a boat came—a boat that held two Kanakas and a white man.

"Bit late for a pleasure trip, ain't it?"

"They're not stayin', I see. Just come to blow a kiss and off again."

"That's so. Say, that jib looks familiar."

"Ay. Looks like the *Anna*. What's she doin' down this way?"

"Pettigrew's boat, ain't it?"

"Yep. But that ain't Pettigrew in the dinghy."

"Maybe it's the young fellow he's runnin' with now."

"Thought Donovan—"

"Oh, there's some queer tale Donovan's drowned, anyway. No, I don't know nothin'. My mind's a virgin slate, open to receive impressions, but not givin' any away. I don't know nothin'. See? Hey, Pereira, take yer elbow out o' my ribs."

Pereira paid no heed. He pushed through the little crowd of idlers, and stood in front of them, staring down at the dinghy that came so swiftly across the placid water. Yes, it was Morgan. Why had he come? Stewart had said he was imprisoned on Paviete. Yet even as he said it, his eyes had slid in a way that Pereira knew meant he was saying something of which he felt doubtful. He was hurrying north because he knew, knew or guessed, that Morgan was not dead. And now here was Morgan sitting in the stern of the dinghy with a set

face, and determination in every line of his lean body. Pereira moved forward and went down to the water's edge. The sun was touching the waves and soon the quick darkness would be on them, but it was still light enough for him to see Morgan's face.

IN SILENCE Morgan landed. He spoke a word or two of direction to Tain and then turned to go up the shelving beach. But Pereira stopped him. For a moment they stood staring at each other in the hurrying twilight, till Pereira said, "Why have you come?"

Morgan pushed him aside.

"Stand back. You stopped me once before. I haven't settled with you yet, but I will sometime. Don't think I've forgotten. Get out of my way."

"Why have you come?"

"Get out of it," said Morgan hotly. "I can guess your game, Pereira. You're giving him time to get away, aren't you? Or hasn't he come yet? His ship's nowhere to be seen, so he's either gone or not come. But if he's already been here, by God I'll know it. I'll get it out of someone. They're not all cut-throats in Kikia. I'll bet I'll get the truth out of someone up at Jake's if any of 'em are still sober."

"Jake he know nothing."

"Maybe not. And you know everything, eh? Thanks. I'm not wasting time on you. Let me pass."

Pereira's hand caught him by the wrist. He winced and Pereira bent forward.

"Chang's tricks," he murmured. "Chang very clever man. How you make da get-away, eh?"

"What's it got to do with you? And how did you know? Stewart's been here?"

"He's been here."

"Then Moses was right," mused Morgan in parenthesis. "Look here, I'll not tell you any more to get your greasy fingers off my arm."

"Listen," urged Pereira. "You want—what do you want? To fin' Stewart. And after?"

There was no reply, but he could hear Morgan's quickened breathing.

"Pearls," said Pereira, "yes, I know. He has them. I ask him to show me, and he show me. I ask him to give, to share, to sell. He will not. *Dias*, he will not. Now he is gone. Honolulu."

Morgan gave an exclamation of despair.

"Gone?"

"At midday."

"Midday? You mean I've missed him by a few hours. What the—"

"Maybe you catch him up."

"Huh! Maybe I will. Damned easy, isn't it, when you think of the water between here and Honolulu?"

"I know the way he chose."

"You do? Yes, I reckon you do. Well, spit it out. I'll know which way not to take then."

"I do not lie," retorted Pereira, hurt.

"I say he tell me which way he will take."

"What's the idea?" demanded Morgan.

"What do you want?"

Pereira's face was thrust close to his. He could see the twitching nostrils, the unsteadiness of the lips. The grip of gnarled fingers about his wrist tightened painfully. The hoarse voice spoke, spitting out words that gave the listener the clue to this strange bitterness. A thin breeze lifted the matted hair above the brown forehead. Morgan felt a tremor of something that was almost fear as he stared back into the sunken eyes.

"He refuse me," concluded Pereira. "He refuse me—me, Pereira! And now he has gone north—out of my reach. But you, maybe you reach him. By St. Joseph Island, yes, he take da way east of current. Dangerous. Does he min'? No."

"East of the current? By St. Joseph Island? You're sure?"

"I do not lie," said Pereira.

Morgan stood irresolute.

"What's the game?" he said again. "If you're double-crossing me, you'll be sorry for it. I've got one score against you. If it hadn't been for you—"

"You say I am lying?" the other burst out excitedly. "You say so, do you? I help you, I tell you which way, and you say I lie. Come quick. I show you if I lie."

With hurried steps he led the way down the darkening beach road to his own hut. The sun had gone, and the short twilight fell abruptly into night. The quiet breeze was growing wilder. Above Morgan's head the branches clashed and groaned eerily. Lights were showing in a few houses, and from Jake's came the echo of a rough song. The idlers had returned to their cups. Their careless voices had a friendly human sound, and Morgan lingered on the sill of Pereira's dark room, loth to lose touch with the outside world. His host lit a lamp and mo-

tioned him to enter. He did so, watching fascinated while Pereira unlocked an iron-bound chest and searched for something. Presently the swart figure turned to him, holding aloft a crucifix which made him catch his breath in wonder at its beauty.

"I swear . . ." began Pereira, and Morgan knew he was speaking the truth. The ugly shrunken body, the cunning face, seemed to him changed, invested with the passionate sincerity that stirred Pereira to the depths. He waited till there was silence in the little room.

"All right, Pereira. Guess you're square this time. East, by St. Joseph Island. It's all a matter of luck now."

"You will get him," said Pereira. "Yes, you get him all right. I know it. I know it. And when you do—"

The sentences came in a whisper. Without another word Morgan turned and went out, shutting the door on that picture of Pereira with the cross held over his head, and the fierce hate in his eyes.

Tain was waiting anxiously. He distrusted this place where Moriani had once met with evil. With voluble relief he pushed off, and before long they heard Pettigrew's hail.

"What luck?" he demanded, as Morgan swung aboard. "Is he gone? Or ain't he come?"

"He's been and gone, a few hours ago. Don't curse. We've got just a sporting chance. He's gone east of the current by St. Joseph Island."

"Who told you?"

"Pereira."

"Pereira! And you swallowed it? Then God forgive you for a fool, my boy. Is it likely that blackguard would tell you the truth? Isn't he hand in glove with Stewart?"

"Listen. It's the goods this time. He wasn't lying. He's got a grudge against Stewart. He—he's not quite sane, I think."

Pettigrew listened to the story without interruption. When Morgan had finished he drew a long breath.

"I guess you're right, an' we've got the truth this time. Queer how a man like him should get struck on a thing like that, ain't it? Touched, of course. Aw yes, most of 'em is in these parts. East of the current, that means nor'east by east til we're past St. Joseph."

A FIGHT was in progress in the 'foc'ale of the *Swallow*. Puahe, a Solomon boy, and Manea, a Tahitian, drew their knives as a long-smoldering quarrel flared up at last. In less than three minutes Puahe lay gasping his life away, his blood staining the boards. But he did not go unavenged. Manea, standing astraddle in triumph, noticed a thread of blood where the enemy's kris had grazed his chest. Over him crept a sensation of deadly nausea. His skin seemed on fire. He realized what had happened. Puahe's kris had been poisoned. Screaming, he rushed on deck tearing at his chest, trying to outstrip the maddening pain. Lamotte, coming hastily at the noise, found him racing round and round in a circle uttering shrill cries. Suddenly he stopped, swaying drunkenly. Then with a bellow of pain he put down his head and charged like a bull for the side of the ship. Lamotte rushed forward, but it was too late. The waves closed over the writhing body, and Lamotte went to make inquiries.

"What's up?" demanded Stewart meeting him. "Manea gone mad?"

"I think so. He's hurled himself into the sea."

Together they interrogated the cowering boys, and at the end of the examination Stewart heaved a sigh of disgust.

"They're like tigers, always at each other's throats."

He turned over the dead body with his foot.

"Cute beggars, these Solomon Islanders. That poison is some secret. They make it from roots. Filthy stuff with lingering action. Sent that poor devil mad, I expect. Have him chucked overboard. Kaoha, you make Puahe go in sea quick. You wash blood, make board all clean all same new board."

The two remaining boys, sobered by Manea's end, set to work. Stewart's face wore an angry look.

"What a devil of a nuisance! We'll have to put in at St. Joseph and ship a couple more boys. It's the last time I take a Solomon boy on board. Quarrelsome folks! We ought to make St. Joseph early to-morrow morning."

A thought struck him.

"And don't you start any monkey tricks while we're there. Understand?"

Lamotte made no reply. He slouched

away, muttering. The unsteadiness of his gait was not due to the roll of the ship. He was drinking too much, drinking recklessly, without discrimination, trying to summon up courage to—to—what? Before him there rose always the same picture, a picture of Stewart lying still, his curious light-colored eyes closed in a sleep from which he would not awaken.

Valerie knew that he was troubled. He was continually hovering round her, as if he were trying to tell her something. Often she caught him looking at her with an expression which she could not understand. She began to feel vaguely uneasy. Stewart was taciturn, apparently indifferent. But she knew that the clash must come soon. She dared not think too much about Morgan. Those days when he and she had hung on to life with such tenacious hands seemed very far away. Yet it had all happened. She leaned over the side of the *Swallow* and gazed across the moonlit waters. Where was Morgan? The uncertainty brought an ache to her heart, an ache that would not be subdued.

"Sorry," said a voice in the darkness. Stewart coming past had touched her. She drew away from his murmured apologies. He paused.

"Hot, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Lamotte's drinking a lot this trip."

"Yes."

"What's the matter? Tired?"

"A bit."

He found her hands in the darkness. They lay in his, cold and unresponsive.

"You can't escape me."

At the fierce triumph in his voice, something broke loose within her.

"What do you mean?"

"You know."

"Then you can stop thinking about it," she told him hotly. "Just because I was rather foolish at the beginning, you think you can do what you like. Please understand. I'd rather you weren't so friendly towards me. Of course I'm awfully grateful and all that, but, it's got to stop."

With an effort she wrenched herself free. Lamotte came stumbling up the companion. In the darkness he made his way to where they stood. They could not see his face, but they could hear his labored breathing.

"What is it?" said Stewart, aware instantly that something had happened.

Lamotte's voice came out of the night like the crackle of a rifle shot.

"Donovan. He's down there. He's beckoning. Not to me. To someone behind him. Someone who's coming."

"Don't be a fool!"

"Someone's coming. Morgan! That's who it is. He'll come. I know it. We'll never see Honolulu. Do you remember what he said on the beach at Kikia? 'One day there'll come a wet hand at your throat, Lamotte.' We've said he was dead. Did we ever believe it? Aren't we hurrying like the devil because we're afraid of him? Yes, yes, yes, it is so."

He stumbled away, leaving a startled silence behind him.

"He's mad," said Stewart at last. "Did you hear what he said about Morgan?"

"Yes."

Her voice quavered on the word. Some indescribable quality that sounded in it made Stewart say sharply, "If he did come, you'd welcome him, I suppose?"

She did not answer. He felt for her shoulders and his fingers sank cruelly into the soft flesh.

"What is he to you? You've never told me what happened. You like him, don't you? More than that. More than that, eh? Isn't it true? Tell me! Do you love him?"

His jealousy awoke the devil of recklessness in Valerie.

"Yes, I love him. Now you know the truth. You can do what you like with me. I don't care. I don't care what you do. I've never believed he was dead. He's alive. I know it—"

She stopped, aware all at once of what she was saying. Stewart heard her give a little gasp of fear. For a moment he stood quite still. All the blood in his body seemed rushing to his head. A curious light shone before his eyes. He had guessed it. But to hear it from her own lips, to hear that she loved Morgan, his enemy, the man he had sworn to kill if he got the chance. In his seething brain there rose a furious determination to punish her for the pain she was dealing him. He would give back hurt for hurt, he would show her whether she could flout him like this. Till that moment there had mingled with his passion a streak of purer, colder emotion that, unknown to Valerie, had yet kept her safe from him.

Now it was lost, swallowed up in the tide

which her words had set swirling. Side by side with desire, hatred leapt into being. He flung her from him and crouched back in the darkness, ready to spring. He was lost to all sense of time and place and being. For the first time in his life he was suffering because of a woman. Well, he would not suffer alone.

"You love him, do you?" he said slowly. "Very well. It doesn't matter whether you do or not, because you'll never marry him. You'll marry me. You hear? If not—"

He broke off, then burst out savagely. "Do you know who Paul is? Do you know why he had to leave France when you were a kid? You've heard of Lamartine, the forger, wanted in Paris and elsewhere? Well, it's Paul. If I chose, I could give him up. His record wouldn't help if he were charged with Donovan's murder, would it?"

There was an agonized pause. Then he heard her stumble down the companion and Lamotte's startled words as she vanished into her cabin. He stopped at the faint sound of a turned key. Re-action caught him. He found himself trembling. Kacha came up to him with some question and he answered mechanically, forcing himself to speak quietly.

The loss of Puahe and Manea had left them very short-handed. Lamotte and Stewart took alternate watches. They avoided each other's eyes as they met in the dimly lit cabin. Lamotte was aware that some crisis had occurred and he was vaguely uneasy. He knew better than to question Stewart, and Valerie was inaccessible. The night dragged itself away. Dawn broke grey and heavy. The sky had a dead, ugly look.

"The sooner we make St. Joseph the better it will be," said Lamotte, and Stewart nodded agreement.

FOUR hours later, the *Anna* hove in sight, bucketing through the waves that snapped their teeth at her coming. The St. Joseph people had blown enough of the reef to make a safe opening for large size vessels to enter. Huddled in the comparative security of the lagoon by a trading schooner, the *Helen* from Kikia, copra-boat on its way westward, and the *Swallow*. Drawn up on the beach was a array of catamarans of assorted sizes. The *Anna* negotiated the pit in the reef as

Pettigrew sent up a shout as they gained entrance.

"Praise be to God, we've got her!"

They hailed the *Swallow*, but there was no reply. The long wailing "Ahoy!" was swept away on the wind. Morgan turned a flushed face to Pettigrew.

"They're all ashore. Come on!"

"Wait," said Pettigrew. "See here, you've got to—Morgan, for the love of Christ keep steady. You're young and you think life don't matter. If you can get through without blood-lettin', so much the better. If you can't—"

He stopped, realizing the utter uselessness of trying to check the younger man. They fought their way through the wind until the keel of the dinghy grated on the beach. The captain of the trading schooner, Thompson by name, hailed them, passing satirical remarks about the coming storm. Pettigrew nodded to him.

"Yes, looks perishin' black, don't it? Seen anything of Stewart—do you know him?"

The captain spat contemptuously.

"I reckon there's few men in the Islands don't know Rat Stewart. He's put in for a couple of fresh boys. Lost two of his out there, he says. He's found what he wanted, but I guess he'll sit tight until the row's over. You'll find him at Pete Haddon's. Lamotte's there too. That young woman, Lamotte's sister, ain't she? Thought so. Good lookin', but not my style."

They left him to his own volubility and turned off in the direction of the house which he indicated by a jerk of his thumb. It was a low adobe building, standing back in a little grove of palms. For a moment Morgan paused with his hand on the door.

Then he flung it wide open, and went in.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THAT moment the storm broke. High overhead came a thin sound like the screaming of fifes in the tops of the palm trees. It was the note of the destroyer. Across the island the wind came roaring. The cowering trees could not withstand the onslaught. They snapped the bits of brushwood, and lay in stunned confusion where the wind flung them.

The sea was a mass of churning foam, yellowish near the shore, dull gray farther out beyond the reef. It seemed as though

the sea would presently swallow up St. Joseph. Higher and higher swept the waves towards the cluster of low houses and the tin church. The catamarans disappeared, hurled like corks into the seething water. The church windows were blown in, and the wind set the bell ringing. The notes rang out fitfully, piercing the gusts that threatened the whole flimsy structure. The clamor of wind and sea was terrifying. And soon to the artillery of the waves were added the drums of the rain. It fell in pitiless driving rods that stabbed and blinded.

In the house of Pete Haddon five men waited in a tense silence. At the sight of Morgan, Lamotte sprang to his feet. His face went white. He tried to say something but the words died away into an inarticulate gurgle. It was Stewart who spoke, drawing his words from the chair where he sat with a half-dealt pack of cards in his hand. He made no movement when the door opened. His narrowed eyes gave no hint of whatever emotion lay behind his expressionless face. Pete Haddon, a man of experience, felt stealthily for his gun.

"What do you want, Morgan?"

There was a long pause. Outside, the storm was bringing up its first line of attack. The dull thudding of the battering-rams sounded on the adobe walls. Haddon thought of his cocoa-palm plantation and his heart sank. Yet he dared not go to the window. He knew that the slightest movement would be enough to start the trouble which was imminent. He was a thin, wiry man with smooth black hair and a sallow face. His gaze strayed anxiously to Lamotte. Here, he felt, was the one who would start things. What made the fellow so white? (God, what a storm! Those crashes—they must be the trees.) Miss Lamotte, in the next room with his wife, how was she bearing it? He thought her a striking girl, one at whom men would look more than twice. There was something—something about the way she walked and the way she carried that proud head—well, in short, there was—something. (That belt of six-year olds, due to mature the following season, how would they stand it?) Who was this Morgan? He looked as if he'd fly at their throats for two pins. Strongly built chap. Stronger than Stewart. Stewart and Lamotte and the girl, they were all of them "taut," as he said to his wife afterwards. Especially Lamotte.

He began to feel nervous of what Lamotte would do. This fool, he thought, this fool.

"What do you want, Morgan?"

Morgan took a step forward. Something warned Haddon of the deadly menace that lay behind the action. His hand slid to his belt.

"I don't want to know what the row's about," he said. "But the first man who draws a bead has got to reckon with me. I'll have no blood shed in this house."

There was a slight pause. It was Lamotte who broke the silence.

"I knew they would come," he was saying. "Last night I said so."

The wind yelled round the house like a live thing. The innumerable fingers of the rain tore at the rattling shutters.

"You know what I've come for," Morgan said. "It's no good trying to bluff, Stewart. The game's up. Give me the pearls, you thief!"

"Who's bluffing?" demanded Stewart, insolently. "You've no shadow of right to those pearls. It was I who found them, not you."

"And how? By a stolen chart taken from a dead man. You killed Donovan, you and Lamotte."

"No," shouted Lamotte. His face was livid with terror. "No, no, no. Why should you say I killed him? It's a lie—a cursed lie! I swear it. Why should I kill him? We had—we had another chart. It was not Donovan's. I swear I did not kill him. Why do you look at me like that? Do I look like a murderer?"

"Yes," retorted Pettigrew.

"It's a lie," screamed Lamotte, and Stewart's lips tightened. "Why do you pick on me and not on Stewart? I have never killed a man in my life."

"It was Stewart who killed him, then?" interposed Pettigrew cunningly. Lamotte swallowed the bait.

"Yes, yes. That is so. It was he who held the knife, not I. He struck him. Stewart struck him."

"You damned liar," said Stewart.

Pettigrew fastened on the truth.

"No good, Lamotte. Stewart never killed him."

"But he planned it." Lamotte spoke jerkily. His breath came fast, choking his utterance. "He planned it. He wanted Donovan dead. Pearls—yes, he had heard of them. Some man in Wakatea told us.

Stewart is mad over pearls. He would give his soul for them. When he knew there were pearls in Taukura he swore he would have them. We waited till the *Spindrift* was half a day out. We followed her. We drew alongside. Donovan knew, I think. Yes, he knew. We fought, all of us. How dark it was! In the deck-house we had him. He crumpled up like a thing of paper, without a sound. But it was not I who killed him."

He glanced from face to face in desperate bravado. His terror became ludicrous, pitiable. But in Pettigrew there was no pity. He decided to play a high card.

"Don't forget what we found in his hand—that earring. Your earring, Lamotte. He must have tore it out of your ear just before you struck him."

"No, no," said Lamotte. "You lie! you lie! It was not mine. Besides—one earring. It proves nothing. Where is the other? You can prove nothing—nothing!"

"Proof?" shouted Pettigrew. "What the hell proof do I want? Ain't you the livin', breathin' proof? You killed him. Every word you say you give yourself away. Look at you this minute; white as a sheet, like as if you'd seen a ghost—"

"It was Stewart," Lamotte screamed. "Yes, I tell you. The things he has done—in Pavieta—in Tahiti—yes, a friend of yours, Morgan—what was his name? You remember? That was Stewart. He killed him. And there are others—I will tell everything—"

Stewart leapt to his feet. All the hidden hatred that surged between the two burst its dam. At sight of his livid face Lamotte turned blindly. His groping hands wrenched at the door. He tore it open and rushed out into the storm. With an oath Stewart followed him. Quick as thought Haddon slammed the door. He remarked briefly to the other two: "We'll just wait here—till one of 'em comes back." To give point to his words he took out his gun and laid it on the table in front of him.

THE fury of the wind knocked Stewart flat. He sprawled in the mud, and only the sight of Lamotte loping away down the path, dragged him to his feet again. They ran with the wind. It was impossible to face it. Lamotte's clothes were drenched through in less than a minute. The soggy garments clung to his limbs, affording scant

protection against the stinging rain. Again and again he fell, tripped by the tangle of broken branches. On and on he went, heedless of obstacles, like a blind man in a nightmare. Behind him labored the avenger, his heart rolling from side to side, his breath coming in great sobs.

Avoiding the open shore, Lamotte plunged down a path that led towards the interior of the island. A palm, swaying perilously, crashed within a foot of him. It lay across the path and he leapt over it. Stung by the rain, choked by the heavy beating of his heart, he stumbled on, running wildly, madly, anywhere away from the pursuer. What a fool he had been to come among the trees. Who knew what might be lurking in the plantation? Something over there was moving. A man? A man wounded, dying of a knife wound—no, it was a log. His heart was hammering against his sides but he dared not stop. He turned his head. Stewart, yes, it was Stewart. But was it?

All at once he began to be afraid of the rain. It was like knives cutting into his skin. It was trying to kill him. He couldn't get away from it. He began to moan, a little cry of fear such as a scared animal gives. The path shelved and its lower part resembled a miniature cataract. The rush of water swept him off his feet. He went rolling down the slope, his outstretched hands scrabbling wildly for a hold. Once he touched something soft and flabby that moved under his groping fingers. He cried out, and flung it away with all the strength he had left. If the noise—the frightful noise—would cease for a moment, he would be able to collect his wits. But the noise did not cease. It went on and on, louder and more insistent, till his brain rocked with the rocking earth.

Stewart was still coming on. Though he was nearly done, he held on gamely. Lamotte told himself that it was Stewart. He tried to re-assure himself by saying "Stewart, Stewart," over and over again. But his bruised lips formed Donovan's name every time.

A check occurred in the path. A tree had fallen athwart the way, bringing with it a tangle of clinging plants whose tough stems formed a dense net work. Lamotte hurled himself at the block but he could not manage it. His strength had gone. He drew back and tried again. In vain. Stewart came crash-

ing down the path and found him, with his back to the fallen mass, cornered like a hunted rat, bold with the last desperate boldness of the doomed animal. They faced each other swaying drunkenly, their faces like the faces of drowned men. Weakly they closed, and then at the touch of each other's hands, the spirit leapt up in the failing bodies.

There was no one to watch them, no one to see the writhing forms that swayed and rolled and staggered up again. Lamotte, staring suddenly past the trees, covered his eyes with hands grown nerveless. He stepped back and his foot slid from under him at the drive of Stewart's fist. He fell heavily and lay on his back, his arms flung wide, a thin trickle of blood flowing from the back of his head. He lay quite still, with the rain beating into his staring eyes.

AS THE door slammed behind Stewart, the sound of a faint cry made Morgan turn. There in the doorway of an inner room stood the thin form of Mrs. Haddon, a little wisp of a woman, bright-eyed, with yellow straggly hair that she kept brushing back from her forehead with quick nervous movements of her fluttering hands. She looked quickly from one to another taking in the picture with a glance of those bird-like eyes; her husband, flat against the door, gun in hand; Pettigrew at the round table, sprawling in a chair as if he had been flung there; at his side a stranger on whose dark face rage was written. For an instant she wondered why sudden longing flamed in his eyes. Then she understood.

He was looking at Valerie.

Mrs. Haddon felt the girl's hand grip her arm so sharply that she bit back a cry of pain. Valerie had gone so white that for one moment Mrs. Haddon thought she was going to faint. With an effort she pulled herself together. For what seemed an endless time to her taut nerves they all stood like ghosts, unmoving, unreal, while the storm mouthed the house, trying to devour it. Then Morgan's lips trembled in spite of himself. Pettigrew, watching, felt a queer numb pain creeping round his heart. Those two, with their souls in their eyes.

It was Mrs. Haddon who broke the spell. "What is it? We heard a gun. Is anyone hurt? And where is Mr. Lamotte?"

"No one is hurt."

Mrs. Haddon had lived on St. Joseph Island for seventeen years. She did not argue.

The door burst open and Stewart staggered into the hut. There was blood on his face.

"Give me a drink, quick," he demanded.

In silence Haddon found the whisky and poured out a stiff dose. Stewart gulped it and sat shivering.

"Ain't Lamotte comin' back?"

"No," said Stewart after a pause.

No one spoke.

"Can't anyone say something?" he demanded at last. "Valerie, it's no use looking like that. When we get to Honolulu—when we're married—"

"Married?" burst out Morgan.

"Damn your eyes, why not?" retorted Stewart insolently.

Morgan gulped down his truculence. He glanced again at the pale misery of the girl's face.

"You don't love him," he said. "There's something at the back of it all. What is it? What is it?"

There was no answer. The storm was growing more furious. Almost it seemed as if the house must be carried away by the violence of the gale. A shutter was torn away. It went with a crash, and a minute later the wind was in at the empty space like a tornado. Little Mrs. Haddon brought a box that had come from Wakatea laden with groceries. With all her strength she propped it up, and Morgan lent his weight. It was labelled "Robin Starch," with the picture of a cheeky, bright-eyed bird beside the letters. Looking at it, Morgan had a sudden, sick longing for the grey mists of England. He would leave this hectic flamboyancy of the South and go home. What would be the use? What would home be, what would England be, without Valerie? Would his body rest in the North if he left his heart in the South, fast in the careless hands of a girl? She was going to marry Stewart. Then she loved him. Unless—

Wedging the box more firmly he went to Valerie and stood so that he could see her eyes.

"Do you love him?"

The wind and the rain took up the question, screaming it, shouting it, till it seemed that the words echoed round the island. Valerie put her hands to her ears to shut out

the sound, but it persisted. Morgan took her hands and pulled them away gently. At his touch the quick blood leapt to her face.

"Tell me the truth," he was saying. "Don't be scared. Tell me the truth."

She would not, but he knew it. In his heart there began a singing whose sound drowned even the noise of the storm. He dropped her hands and turned away.

Stewart was regarding him malevolently.

"As soon as we get quit of this house and Haddon's little lead arbitrator, I'll settle with you," he said.

There came one of those sudden inexplicable pauses that sometimes occur in tropical storms. For nearly a minute there was an uncanny stillness. Then the storm burst out again with tenfold violence. Pettigrew yawned and stretched himself.

Haddon was too quick for him. As Pettigrew sprang at him, his gun spat viciously and Pettigrew fell back tearing at a wounded shoulder. Mrs. Haddon and Valerie caught him. Somehow they helped him to another room. The others never moved. They sat like stone figures. Only their furtive watchful eyes showed that they were alive.

CHAPTER XIX

TOWARDS eight o'clock the storm slackened. The fury of the wind abated, to burst out now and again in fierce gusts that shook the walls of Haddon's house and threatened the rattling shutters.

In the next room Pettigrew slept heavily. Mrs. Haddon watched him with maternal eyes. It was nice to have someone to take care of, she reflected. Pete was never ill. She wasn't grumbling. She was thankful, she told herself severely, very thankful that Pete never was ill. Yet it was a change to have someone helpless and hurt under her care. That was it, a change. She looked at Valerie, sitting white and motionless on the other side of the camp bed. All the thwarted motherhood in her rose up at sight of that silent figure. On an impulse she went and put a thin arm timidly about Val's shoulders.

"You mustn't take it like this," she said. "It's bad for you to be so hard about it. Try to cry, my dear. It'll ease the pain."

"I can't cry."

"You're so young," said Mrs. Haddon,

"and you're so lovely. I was about your age when I married Pete. No one can say he's not a good husband," she went on with seeming irrelevance. "And it's not lonely here, not what you might call really lonely."

Her faded eyes regarded the younger woman wistfully.

She rose and began to walk up and down the room.

"What's the time?"

Mrs. Haddon consulted a battered wrist-watch.

"Nearly eight. I don't think the storm's so bad. The last one we had lasted fourteen hours and blew off the roof of the missionary's house. Quite destroyed everything in the house, of course, with all the wet. What's the matter, dear?"

"Listen," said Val, at the door. "They're not talking. Why are they all sitting so still?" She pushed the door ajar. "They look like waxworks," she said.

"Come back and sit down," whispered Mrs. Haddon with sudden anxiety. "Don't go in there, my dear."

But Val had disappeared. With a glance at the sleeping man, Mrs. Haddon hurried after her and stood in the doorway, watching with a nameless fear at her heart.

At sight of Val the men looked up. For what seemed an endless time no one spoke. Then Stewart said, "The storm's slackening. We'll be able to get away to-morrow by the afternoon."

"We?"

"Yes, you and I. You've not forgotten we're going to Honolulu?"

"You're going alone."

He stared at her.

"So that's the game? Trying to get off your word?"

"And why did I give you my word?" retorted Val. "You know why it was. There's no reason why I should keep it—now."

"None," he agreed, "except that you cared for me once."

The color stole into her white face. How still Morgan was in the dim lamp light! What was he thinking?

"I never cared for you."

"Yet you were going to marry him. Why?"

It was Morgan who spoke. His voice was not quite steady.

"Because of Paul," said Val recklessly. "If Paul were alive now, I'd have to go on with it. You must know what I mean."

"He—Stewart had a hold over you because of Lamotte?"

"Yes. It's no good pretending that Paul wasn't—that he didn't—"

"Donovan?"

"Yes, and something else."

He glanced at the bowed head.

"And I suppose he promised Lamotte should suffer unless—"

"Unless I married him."

Stewart tilted back his chair. He swung one leg across the other. Very deliberately he lit a cigarette. For a long time he watched the curling smoke. Outside the thunder of the wind boomed ceaselessly, growing weaker as the night dragged away. It seemed as though someone was pulling and pulling at a string which must break at last. The strain grew intolerable. Valerie looked from one to the other. She wanted to scream. The storm, the driving rain, the tenseness of the situation, combined to destroy her self-control. Across the tangled web of emotion shot the thought of Lamotte, lying alone, dead in the night. A wave of utter loneliness swept over her.

Now Paul was gone, who was there left to care what became of her? Suppose she defied Stewart, refused to go on board the *Swallow*? How long could she hold out? Instinct told her that he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. He might force her to bend to his will. There was nothing to prevent him from carrying her bodily on board. Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Haddon would protect her. But was it fair to embroil them? She was nothing to them. It seemed scarcely honorable to involve them in a quarrel with Stewart on her account. Besides, would it be of any use?

Panic seized her. She tried to fight it down, clenching her hands till the knuckles showed white under the skin. From a long way off came Stewart's voice.

"We'll sail by the afternoon, with any luck."

"I won't go," said Valerie. Two spots of red flared in her white face. She flung back her head, quivering for the encounter, at bay. Her desperate, pitiful bravery brought Morgan's simmering rage to boiling point.

"What are you going to do about it?" he demanded sternly of Stewart.

Stewart's insolent eyes opened wider to take in Morgan.

"That's my affair."

"And mine," said Morgan tensely. They paused, measuring each other. "Will you let her alone?"

Valerie caught an inflection in his voice that told of his anger.

Stewart's lips curved in a snarling smile. "Why? She's mine."

His meaning lay plain and unmistakable. Valerie gave a little gasp of dismay. The sound ripped away the barricade that Morgan had built against the tide of his anger. He went white about the lips and his eyes narrowed to two pin-points of rage.

Stewart, watching, knew that the inevitable moment had come. Haddon knew it, too. His fingers stole towards his belt. The feel of the gun under his fingers gave him a sense of power, of security. Those two, glaring like beasts, what would they do? He had an odd feeling that it was all unreal, that they were actors in some dream-play from which none of them would ever awake.

SOMETHING hurled itself across the room and hit him in the stomach so that he subsided in a pathetic heap on the matting. It was Stewart's chair. Haddon, getting back his wind in shrill whoops, saw that the two men were at grips.

They fought it out there, in the shadows of the dimly lit room, amidst the echoes of the dying storm. At the touch of each other's flesh the savage hate which had waited for so long flared up into a passionate determination to kill. The thin veneer of civilization was swept away like a shred of silk. The fierceness of the tropical night caught them, sweeping them back to the primitive, to the time when man was still a half-beast who killed his enemy by the strength of his hands.

Morgan's right shot out and Stewart staggered back. He leaned heavily against the crazy table and it fell to the ground, scattering the cards. In a moment he had regained his balance. They closed again. The violent impact of their bodies jerked a grunt from Morgan. He hit out, and felt a shudder go through his arm. Like flails their arms rose and fell. Stewart's left got home, and in Morgan's head a queer buzzing noise began. A mist rose before his eyes. Through it he could see Stewart's face, and the sight fired him again. He lunged and caught him round the waist, bringing all his weight to bear in an effort to throw his

adversary. With an oath Stewart wrenched himself free. If Morgan once got him down! He was aware of Valerie, mute and terrified, clinging to little Mrs. Haddon. There was blood on his hands. They were wet and slippery. Morgan was coming on again. He was like a bull. His great fists rose and fell, rose and fell. Stewart fought back the panic that was choking him. His knuckles smashed into Morgan's jaw, and he saw him reel back against the wall.

He leapt at him, and felt his fingers rip through Morgan's shirt. There was blood on the bared chest. He tried that upward thrust again, mistimed it by a fraction of a second, and nearly lost his balance as his fist met the empty air. Morgan feinted and had him round the chest. The great sinewy arms slid under his arm-pits and he could feel the clenched hands meet in the middle of his back. The strain on his ribs was terrific. Another instant and he must surely hear the faint snap of the bones. His desperate hands sought Morgan's throat and tore at it until Morgan flung him off.

Staggering blindly backwards he crashed into the bracket which held the solitary lamp. There came a smash of broken glass, a momentary blaze, and then utter darkness.

Stealthily they felt for each other, stretching out quivering hands as if they had been stricken blind. They moved cautiously, fearfully, each striving to catch the other unawares. There was something uncanny, something not quite real, about the noiseless tread of padding feet, the groping hands that Old Man Death, waiting for his quarry, guided towards each other so warily.

An infinitesimal sound gave Morgan's whereabouts. Swiftly Stewart crouched. He judged his distance well. He had Morgan round the thighs, pulling him down, pulling him down, heedless of the sledge hammer that rained blows on his head and shoulders. He was writhing himself around Morgan's legs, shifting his weight from side to side. A trick that Kaoha had taught him came into his mind. His arms slid to Morgan's knees. Putting all his strength into it, he jerked himself backwards with a sudden violence that threw Morgan sprawling beside him. They closed again, lying prone, snarling like two wolves in the dark. Morgan struggled to his knees, fell again, felt Stewart's hands at his face. Stewart's

thumbs pressing on his eyeballs. He shouted at the pain and tore himself free.

There was a light in the room. Mrs. Haddon was holding in her hands the lamp from Pettigrew's room. They were near Haddon, who still sat, white-faced and panting, on the floor. Morgan's hands went to his eyes. They ached intolerably. A scream came from Valerie. "Look out!"

Stewart had seized the gun from the still dazed Haddon. In the nick of time Morgan flung himself forward. A bullet buried itself in the wall behind. The blood thundered in his ears as they both went down, fighting for the weapon. A second shot hit the ceiling. "I'll get you," Stewart was saying; "I'll get you!" Triumph gleamed in the blood-wet face. It made Morgan see red. His left hand had Stewart's wrist. Still gripping it, he staggered on to one knee, while his right hand sought Stewart's elbow. In spite of the man's struggles he held him down. He forced Stewart's arm across his knee and bent with all his strength.

There came a sound like the snapping of a broken branch. The splintered bone jagged through the skin. Stewart was screaming like a shot hare. He staggered to his feet and began walking round and round in a circle, his right swinging loose and helpless, his sagging fingers still tangled in the gun. He stumbled and in an instant Morgan fastened on him. His great hands found Stewart's throat.

It was Mrs. Haddon who first found her wits. She rushed forward, tugging at those fierce hands, calling to her husband for help. Still swaying, Pete lurched across the room and caught at Morgan's arms.

"You'll kill him," he shouted. "Leggo, fool!"

Stewart's face was changing color. His agonized eyes begged for help. But the relentless hands at his throat never relaxed. Haddon and his wife tugged until the perspiration stood on their foreheads in little beads. Morgan was laughing madly. It was funny they should try to save Stewart. Nothing in the world could save him.

"Take your hands off."

Valerie's voice, sharp-edged, cut across his blurred brain. With a quick movement she motioned Pete and his wife to stand back. Her hands closed over Morgan's, loosening them, drawing them away. Stewart rolled over and Haddon took him by the

shoulders and dragged him to a low chair.

Morgan swayed upright. For a moment he stood rocking drunkenly. Then he slid to a crumpled heap at Valerie's feet.

BY DAWN the storm had ceased. Haddon, anxiously inspecting his plantations, found much damage in the more exposed parts. The six-year-olds had escaped, thanks to the protection of the ridge. Next year they would bear fruit. The present season's crop was spoiled. Haddon saw a lean time ahead. He sighed, and his thoughts went to his wife. He had left her fussing over Stewart's arm. The fellow looked pretty sick. No wonder, mused Haddon, mechanically calculating the cost of replacement in the third plantation. That chap Morgan was a hefty brute. If the girl hadn't been able to manage him, he would have killed Stewart. What would happen to her? Inconceivable that she should go with Stewart.

His uneasy thoughts were checked as he came in sight of the lagoon. He stared; frowned; stared again. There lay the Kikia schooner and the copra-boat, battered but intact. Farther out the *Anna* tugged impatiently at her anchor. There was no sign of the *Swallow*.

Thompson, owner of the *Helen*, trading between Kikia and St. Joseph, came up, looking more sober than he had done for a month past. His heavy face had a perturbed air. In the thin light of dawn he came noiselessly across the beach, and stood silent at Haddon's elbow.

"God, what a night!" he said at last. "The old girl's come through all right. Never thought she'd stand the racket, but she has." He lowered his voice.

"There's a dead man back there," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

"A dead man," repeated Haddon. "You mean—"

"Yes. Lamotte. What made him go out, eh? Looks to me as if he'd fallen. Better come and see."

In silence Haddon followed the stockish figure through the sopping undergrowth that clung about their legs. In silence they stood, looking down at the dead face. Thompson bent closer.

"Looks almost like finger-marks round his throat," he said. "Why did he come out?"

"There was a row," answered Haddon. Their eyes met. Thompson shrugged.

"It's no business of mine. Where's Stewart?"

"Up at the house."

"Does he know?"

"Ay."

"And the *Swallow*? Does he know she's taken her hook?"

"Not yet."

Haddon hesitated, then said abruptly,

"What time are you sailing?"

"About noon."

Haddon pulled off his coat and laid it gently over the dead man's face.

"Better take him down to the padre's. Then I'll go home and see what I can do with a couple of packing cases Yes, I'll take his shoulders."

SUN-UP, and the smell of the earth after rain. Stewart, broken at last, crushed, defeated, watched the dawn with sullen eyes set in a face white with pain. He was alone in the room. He turned from the window and surveyed the disorder of the place. The scattered cards, the splintered chair he had pitched at Haddon, a broken glass on the floor, gave it a rakish air; such an air as a tavern might wear after a hilarious night.

Haddon was coming up the path. He entered the room, shut the door, and put his back against it. Host and guest stared at each other.

"The *Swallow's* gone," said Haddon. "I suppose she broke her moorings in the gale. There's no sign of her. Now see here. Take my advice and go while the going's good. Thompson's sailing at noon. If you go with him—well, you'll be wise."

Stewart's mind was a whirling confusion where one thought predominated. The *Swallow* was gone. Then how—

The door was flung open and Haddon stood aside, leaving a clear road. Stewart hesitated. Then, with his head high, he walked out.

Haddon watched the retreating figure with eyes grown thoughtful.

"Anyway, he's damned game," he said aloud, as he turned back to the house.

His wife met him on the threshold. In her eyes was an unspoken question.

"Yes," he answered, as though in answer to something she had said, "he's gone. His ship's broken loose, and God knows where she may be. What'll he do? How should I know? Most likely he'll get Thompson

to take him as far as Kikia. After that—"

He paused. Someone else was standing by his wife. Valerie's eyes had a hard look in them. The lids were red with want of sleep. When she spoke her voice was utterly devoid of expression.

"Pettigrew's awake, Mrs. Haddon. I think he's all right. Will you go to him?"

"What am I going to do?" she demanded, speaking her thoughts aloud. "Paul's gone, and I haven't a soul. Money—I don't know whether I've got any. Paul always saw to that."

She looked from one to the other, very young in her distress. Mrs. Haddon went indoors again. Valerie followed her. Within the cool room Mrs. Haddon put her arms about the girl. The motherhood in her yearned for this waif of the seas.

"It'll be all right," she soothed her. "You can stay here a bit and we'll talk it over and decide what's to be done."

A thought struck her.

"I'll go in and see after that man," she said briskly. "Stay here, dearie, and if you'd like to be helpful, you can take a needle and cotton and stitch up this corner of the blind."

She waited till the listless fingers were at work, then slipped away.

In the room where Pettigrew lay she found Morgan. He was busy tying a fresh piece of linen round a gash in his arm, tugging at the knot with his teeth. Pettigrew lay stretching, a reminiscent smile on his face.

"You'll find a pair of scissors in the other room," quoth little Mrs. Haddon. She shut the door after him. Pettigrew, alert, caught a smile hovering about her lips.

"Oh, well," he said, "he's a good lad. An' she's a game little devil, askin' pardon, ma'am, for speakin' so free. It's such a long time since I had the pleasure of speakin' to a lady that I've got kind of rusty in my manners."

Anxiety beset Mrs. Haddon. Had she guessed rightly?

"Tell me," she begged urgently, "does he—do you think it will be all right?"

"It won't be his fault if it ain't," said Pettigrew. He sighed. "Wonder how they're gettin' on?" he said, after a while. "I suppose we couldn't—"

"No," said Mrs. Haddon firmly. "Of course we couldn't."

She looked so fierce that Pettigrew sat abjectly still.

MORGAN wandered about the room searching for the scissors. He was acutely conscious of Valerie sitting on a rush chair with some sewing in her hand. At sight of him her needle began to fly in and out very fast indeed. He went awkwardly and stood by her. Still she did not raise her eyes. His heart beat so loudly that it was impossible that she did not hear it. It was drumming out three words, over and over again. Surely she knew. Surely she understood. Yet why should she sit there sewing so unconcernedly while he trembled within three feet of her? Her needle grew slower and slower. It wavered uncertainly in the air and then stopped. "Valerie."

The roar of the long wave on the reef became clear and distinct across the beach. A lazy wind lifted the leaves of the palms. When had they two been alone in a hot room, with the sound of beating surf in the distance? Of course—Paviete.

"Chang's dead."

"I know."

"Last night—I say, I'm awfully sorry for all that's happened. Your brother—"

She lifted her head at the word.

"Stewart," he said, "it was Stewart at the back of everything. But for him, none of it would have happened. Why didn't you let me kill him?" he demanded with sudden fierceness. "I had him under my hands, I had his throat, and you stopped me. When I felt your hands on mine I couldn't go on. Why did you do it?"

She made no answer. He bent down, his heart drumming furiously, but she would not meet his eyes.

"It wasn't—it wasn't because—"

"No," she said, "it wasn't because I cared for—him."

Without warning she buried her head in the crook of her arm and her slim body shook with sobs.

"Don't," he said at last. "All the rotten things are over. We needn't think about them any more."

His voice broke.

"I love you," he said.

He lifted her to her feet. She was staring at him with wide tear-wet eyes. Her red lips quivered. As his arms stole round her, she held him away.

"You're—sure?" she breathed. "Do you think you'd care to marry the sister of—a forger? Lamotte isn't my name. Paul

and I—he was Lamartine the forger. You've heard of him? I didn't know until the other day."

"Do you think that's going to make any difference?"

He bent his lips to hers, and saw the warm tide of red sweep over her face. She would not look at him, but presently two soft arms slid about his neck and drew him closer.

CHAPTER XX

"GOOD Lord," ejaculated Pettigrew, "the *Swallow's* gone!"

In dismay their eyes swept the harbor. There lay the *Anna*. The *Helena*, Thompson's trading schooner, had put out and could be seen hull down on the horizon going in the direction of Kikia.

The two faced each other.

"Why the hell did we let him out of our sight?" demanded Pettigrew wrathfully. "Why—damn my arm!—why didn't you tie a rope to him?"

"We'll have to chase him and look alive about it. Those pearls—"

As they stood above the beach, fuming and disconsolate, Valerie joined them. Even Pettigrew saw that her eyes were like stars as they fell on Morgan.

"Stewart's gone in the *Helena*," she said. "The *Swallow's* gone, blown out last night. Mrs. Haddon told me. Please don't tell Mr. Haddon that you know. He'd kill her, I think, if he knew she'd told."

An hour later the *Anna* set off in pursuit. The Haddons watched her till she was clear of the reefs. Then Haddon went back to his plantations. His wife stood for a long time on the road above the beach. Presently she turned and went home. Into the gray web of her drab unhappy life she was busy weaving a scarlet thread of memory.

Kikia! To Valerie the name was full of ill-omen. It was from Kikia they had set off on that perilous voyage in search of the pearls of Taukura. The men who first said that pearls were tears had spoken truly. What had those of Taukura brought but unhappiness? Donovan and Chang and Lamotte—three men dead. Stewart, broken and maimed, and dangerous now as never before—dangerous because he had his back to the wall at last. He must know it. And, knowing it, how, when would he strike? If he was still determined to get to Honolulu and thence to New York he

would have to wait three weeks at Kikia for the Honolulu mail boat. Useless to imagine that he could get Thompson to make the trip. He might try to get another vessel at Kikia or Amanu to replace the *Swallow*, derelict. Remembering his shattered arm, she was vaguely troubled. Absurd to suggest that she was sorry for him.

Morgan alarmed her. He said little, but he wore a strained look and his dogged pursuit of his fox through the blue fields of the sea had in it something implacable, inexorable, that made her uneasy. She saw plainly that the lust of the pearls had him in its grip and would only be appeased by one thing. The next encounter between the two men would prove final. Some troubled foreboding told her that death was in the air. She had driven him off when she drew Morgan's hands away from Stewart's throat. But would she conquer a second time?

It was Tain who crystallized her uneasiness into definite fears.

"Moriani rub um gun," he told her. "Bime-by suppose meet Tuarti suppose Moriani kill. Lamotte he die, Tuarti he die, Moriani all same glad."

It sent her white-faced to Morgan. Pettigrew, steering, heard the murmur of their voices.

"When we get to Kikia, what are you going to do?"

"Wait till we get there."

"Don't laugh. I'm serious. You're determined to get the pearls—by any means?"

"By God, yes. Valerie, it's no use. You can't stop me. He's got you to thank that he's still alive, but he won't get a second chance."

"You won't stop at anything?"

"No," he said sullenly.

It was useless. The brooding look in his eyes deepened. Her heart sank as he turned away to relieve Pettigrew. The *Anna* was making a good pace. A stiff breeze filled the sails till they felt hard as boards to the touch. Pettigrew came across the deck, wiping the back of his neck with a red cotton "trade" handkerchief.

"Hot, ain't it? The wind don't seem to take it off so much as you'd expect."

He slid to a sitting position in the shadow of the square sail and fanned himself.

"What's up?" he enquired. "Ain't quarrellin' already, are you?"

"No. Only I'm frightened. He and Stewart—" She could not go on.

"Ah," said Pettigrew gravely. "Now here's a thing beyond women. You're up against the strongest thing in the world, and that's hate. Nothin' can beat that. A man don't care what becomes of his soul when that gets him. It takes him singin' into hell and he don't care. Now see here. Leave the boy alone. Don't worry him. Wait till we hit Kikia and see the way things turn out."

"How much longer?"

"We'll be there by noon to-morrow."

The slow hours dragged themselves away. Morgan warned the look-out boy to watch for a glimpse of the trader. It was in vain. Once in the night they saw the lights of a ship ahead, but these disappeared swiftly. It was doubtful whether they belonged to Thompson's vessel.

On through the night went the *Anna*. To those on board, heedless of the beauty of the night and the magic of the flying water, nothing mattered any more save the end of the journey.

BY NOON the next day they sighted Kikia as a blue smear on the horizon. Coming nearer, they could presently make out a strip of white beach, and houses dotted against a green background. The whole aspect of the island spelled peace, but to Valerie there was something ominous in the sight of Kikia basking in the noon heat. Uneasily she watched the men. The Kanakas were silent, as if they felt the foreboding that tainted the air. Even Pettigrew's face wore a queer strained look.

Nearer and nearer they came. Now they were in the dinghy, with Tain standing astride, waiting for the moment to lift the boat on a wave that should carry it into the lagoon. A whirl of green water and they were floating in placid safety within the reef. Behind them the surge thundered, each breaking roller booming like a minute gun. The Kanakas bent to their oars.

Thompson's boat, the *Helena*, was in port. They saw her, clumsy, blowsy thing that she was, but there was no sign of Thompson. Kikia was plunged in mid-day sleep. Somewhere a dog was barking. It was the only sound on the heat-ridden air. The keel grated, and Tain leapt out, his bare feet crunching on the burning sand. His anxious eyes followed them as they walked up the beach.

They went up to Jake's and found the

place silent. Pettigrew pushed open the door and they went in. An uncanny stillness met them. The house appeared to be deserted. Two glasses, still half full, met their eyes. A chair lay overturned on the floor. Morgan looked into the back room. It was empty. They went into the road again.

"Queer," commented Pettigrew. "Guess we'll get no news of him here. Better try Pereira."

They turned and went down the street, past the shuttered windows of the few houses which made up the town. In none of them was any sign of life. They turned round the bend that led to Pereira's hut. Pettigrew looked once at Morgan's tense face, saw his tongue pass stealthily over dry lips, and did not look again.

They became aware of a faint sound as of people whispering. A sharp turn brought them to Pereira's hut. The door was fast shut and before it was gathered a group of people.

Jake was there, rather white about the gills, talking in a feverish undertone to Thompson. The rest of the men, mostly traders, glanced at each other with pursed lips and lifted eyebrows. It struck Morgan that they were waiting for something.

From behind the closed door came a burst of singing, loud mad singing of a voice that cracked and broke and coughed and burst out louder than before. At the sound a handful of Kanakas on the outskirts of the crowd took to their heels. Morgan pushed his way up to the front.

"What's up?"

Thompson's muttered answer was drowned in the torrent of raucous sound from the hut. None of them knew what Pereira was singing. None of them guessed even remotely that it was an old love-song of Castile that issued from that crazy throat.

Jake jerked his thumb towards the hut.

"Stewart's in there," he said.

Morgan went up to the door. The others drew back. One of them laid his hand warningly on Morgan's arm. He shook it off impatiently.

"Guess the Dago's gone crazy."

"What of it?" demanded Morgan. "Stand back. I'm going in."

He knocked. There was no pause in the wild singing. He waited a moment, then looked at Pettigrew. Pettigrew nodded.

Together they put their shoulders to the door and heaved. It was not locked and they crashed into the room. The door slammed behind them.

Pereira sat on the floor. His wild eyes looked at them, but it is doubtful whether he saw them. The terrible singing went on. He was sitting cross-legged. In his lap lay something with which his gnarled hands played, tossing it up and catching it, as a child will play with a ball. But this thing that reddened his fingers was not a ball.

Morgan felt violently sick. He choked back the nausea with an effort. Pettigrew was white to the lips. Pereira paid no attention to them. When they spoke to him, calling him by his name, he did not seem to hear. The room was in disorder. Evidently there had been a struggle. Pereira's clothes were torn. On his naked arm was a knife wound where the blood had clotted.

Stewart—

Moved by a common impulse they turned to a half open door that led to an inner room. They pushed the door open. Immediately their eyes leapt to the opposite wall. There on the gaunt boards hung the crucifix that to Pereira meant God. In that place of evil its supreme beauty shone unmoved, untarnished. Before it, on the ground, were scattered the pearls, a votive offering. And the feet of the weary Christ rested on the Pearl of Taukura.

Pettigrew went on his knees and gathered up the pearls with shaking fingers. Morgan, stretching above him, lifted the crucifix from the wall. For a moment he held it high, while over him wave after wave of triumph surged and broke. From the other room came the monotonous singing of the mad man. It was very hot in spite of the shuttered window. They were in Pereira's sleeping room. A low couch stood in the middle of the floor with a gaudy "trade" cover on its tumbled surface. A broken chair heaped with Spanish and American periodicals, a chest with an empty bottle on the top, and an empty up-turned box labelled "Meager's Honey Soap—Unscented," completed the furniture.

"Where is he?"

There was no sign of Stewart. They looked blankly at each other. Then Pettigrew said, "There's a door here." He went to the wall and kicked aside the empty soap box, disclosing a lock. Morgan threw back

the shutters. They set their shoulders to the door and pushed. It was in vain. After a while they desisted, sore and breathless.

"Wants an ax," decided Pettigrew. He turned to the window and saw there three silent peering faces. He shouted for an ax, and one of the faces disappeared. They all waited, silent, apprehensive, motionless as carved figures until the tool was brought. Pereira was getting hoarse. His raucous voice went on and on, battering the silence till the listeners' nerves grew taut.

It was Jake who handed the ax in through the window after they had waited through ten minutes of eternity.

"What is it?" he said very low.

"We're thinkin' we'll find Stewart in yonder," Pettigrew told him.

"He'll not be alive," said Jake with conviction.

Pettigrew swung the ax. At the third blow the wood around the lock splintered. The sweat stood on his forehead as his powerful arms rose and fell. Doggedly he stuck at it till the lock hung twisted and useless and the door moved slightly on its hinges. Morgan put out his hand and pushed. The door resisted.

"Somethin' behind it," said Pettigrew in a voice that was almost a whisper.

They pushed again, forcing their way in. The room was long and narrow. Save for one thing, it was empty.

"Oh, Christ!" said Pettigrew.

Behind the door they found the thing that had hindered their entrance. The sight set Pettigrew moaning, queer little moans that he was powerless to stop. Into Morgan's frozen eyes came a look from which henceforth they would never be wholly free. Pereira had been thorough. Only by his red hair and that broken arm could they be sure that the Thing had once been Stewart.

CHAPTER XXI

MARTY sat at the door of the store and wiped his neck with a spotted handkerchief. Behind him Pettigrew stood, chuckling in subdued fashion.

"Ah," sighed Marty sentimentally, "Love's young dream! Ah, well!"

"And about time," said Pettigrew. "Them two have been through a hell of a lot, an' they'll bear the marks of it for a long time. But there, bless you, they're young."

There was silence till Marty said, "There goes the sun. I heard it sizzle when it touched water. Say, what do you suppose happened over there?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of Pereira's hut. "Quarrel, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Pettigrew. "I reckon they quarrelled about those pearls. It was the pearls that set Pereira against Stewart before. Else we'd never had the tip that Stewart was goin' St. Joseph way."

His eyes followed two figures that wandered along the beach.

"He ought to be happy," he commented. "He's got the woman he wanted, and the pearls are safe."

"What's he goin' to do?"

"We're goin' north as far as Honolulu. Then they'll go on to England—and I shall come back to Wakatea."

"And then?"

"Morgan's lived here too long to stay North. The South's in his blood, and he'll come back."

"Ay, the South gets us all," Marty said, dreamily.

They spoke no more. The swift tropical twilight slid into night. A round moon came out of the sea and hung low in the sky, a Chinese lantern that sent a golden shaft to pierce the velvet darkness.

Morgan slipped his arm about Valerie's slim shoulders.

"You're happy?"

"Yes. I'm so happy that I'm not sure I'm awake. Who was it that said 'After sorrow, joy. After sorrow, much joy'?"

They looked out to sea, where the *Anna* waited for them. Far down the beach the Kanakas had built a fire. Snatches of their low singing, mingled with soft laughter, came across the sand. The night-wind sighed among the whispering palms. Caught by the magic of the enchanted hour these two who loved each other stood heart to heart in the golden glamor of the moonlit night. Morgan bent his head. His lips sought the face upturned to his.



Seeing is Believing

A Tale of the Frontier of Turkestan

By EVAN ANGLESEA

MR. TOMMY HILDRETH sat gloomily staring at his boots. He was in the cosy little study that overlooks the tangled back garden of the dignified but shabby British Residency at Utch, on the wild eastern frontier of Chinese Turkestan.

Mr. Hildreth was His Majesty's vice-consul in a lawless, ungoverned, trouble-ridden province, and he faced a task no man could hope to accomplish alone. He was supposed to stop the smuggling of illicit opium into his district from the neighboring Soviet-governed province of Semiretchinsk in Russian Turkestan.

But young Tommy Hildreth was not quite alone. Opposite him, long Russian-booted legs stretched out to the blazing fire, sat John Fort; Black Fort, as he was known to his enemies, who were a legion. Black Fort was an agent of sorts—some of them very curious sorts—of his same Majesty's government.

"As if we hadn't got troubles enough," Tommy grumbled, fingering an official letter he held, "without some Nosey Parker of an M. P. butting in to tangle things for us. Not only an M. P.—a knight! And a Labor one, at that! My—sunt!"

Fort grinned. He was a tall, gaunt, black-bearded man. When he was dressed in his rough Russian peasant's shuba, as at present, one could easily believe any of the villainies that made up Black Fort's unenviable reputation—until he smiled. The smile scarcely touched his cynical lips. It just lighted his deep grey eyes, clear and level. But Tommy Hildreth grinned back, somehow reassured.

"Sir Bill Higgs," Fort chuckled, "I know the man. Yorkshire miner. Hard-headed, canny sort, with whom seeing is believing. Well, I'd rather that sort took their holidays in Russia than at—Black-pool. Travel broadens the mind!"

"Yes—at our expense. What does he want with us, anyway? He is due to arrive before sunset, and it's nearly that now. By jove, this sounds like someone—"

From the street sounded the creak of wooden wheels on rough cobbles, the jingles of bells. Hildreth got up and led the way across the wide hall to the faded magnificence of the great drawing-room at the front of the house which served him as consular office.

Through long double windows they could see the one street of Utch in the reddened

light of sunset. It was a street of squalid splendor, lined with gaudily painted houses, half Chinese, half Turkish. Dragon-carved pagodas with flaunting banners elbowed slim minarets where mezzins were calling to prayer. Crouching huts pressed against each other, spilling their foul ordures into the narrow roadway.

An icy, cutting wind whipped through the cobbled thoroughfare. It whirled solid masses of gritty sand into the faces of the bent-backed pedestrians hurrying before the gale. The flying litter of tattered prayer-papers, decayed vegetable-tops, dried dung, all the filth of an Oriental city defiled the bitter autumn air whose chill stench penetrated even through the closed windows of the residency.

A Russian *tarantass* handsomely painted and filled with fur rugs was rattling down the street. Three fine horses abreast surmounted by high yokes with silver bells drew up before the residency. Two uniformed outriders halted smartly, and saluted.

"Here he is!" Hildreth exclaimed, "the Soviet Republic does do its guests handsomely, doesn't it? Might be the Tsar of all the Russias blowing in!"

A flicker of feeling crossed Fort's face. Tsar of all the Russias! Fort had known the man who bore that title—poor miserable devil!

A short, rotund figure wrapped in a rich fur-lined coat was rolling out of the *tarantass*, followed by his luggage. The outriders saluted again, the equipage wheeled and rattled off up the street. The passenger strode on fat legs to the great door, and gave the bell a mighty pull.

"Think I'd better go down and dust the door-mat for him?" Hildreth wondered. Then catching Fort's eye, "No, right you are! Keep our dignity as British officials!"

Hildreth's cockney man-servant knocked and entered. "Sir William 'Iggs, M. P., Esquire," he announced solemnly; and behind his hand, "that's what he told me to say, sir!"

"Show Sir William in," Hildreth ordered severely, "and look here, Tompkins, mind your manners a bit while he's about, eh?"

"Right you are, sir!" Tompkin's face straightened to the required ritualistic solemnity, "I know me place, sir, with me betters!"

Hildreth grinned. Tompkins had seen

him round too many stiff corners for strict formality when they were the only two white men among millions of yellow men, as they usually were. But Tompkins could be counted on in more than one sort of emergency. He showed Sir William Higgs in with the stateliness of an old family retainer.

"HOWDY-DO, Mr. 'ldreth, fine big place you've got here! I hope I see you well?" Without pausing for an answer, the visitor turned his back on his host and spoke to the servant behind him, "and look here, me man, you might joost be getting me a drink, there's a good laad! It's main cold!"

Sir William turned back to Hildreth and shook hands. Then he drew off his fur-lined gloves to warm his chilled fingers at the blaze of logs in the chimney. Pulling out his handkerchief, he wiped the grits out of his sandy mutton-chop "sideburns," his walrus moustache, and the bushy eyebrows overhanging his little, bright-blue eyes. While he polished his glistening bald head, he stared at the unusual figure Fort presented in an English Residency drawing-room.

"A Roosian?" he inquired, jerking his head in the tall Englishman's direction, "a comrade?" He pronounced it "come-raid."

"Oh!" Hildreth pulled himself up. He had been staring in fascinated amazement at his robin-like guest. "I'm sorry! May I introduce Sir William Higgs; Mr. John Fort, Confidential Agent of His Majesty's Civil Service. Will you have a drink, Sir William? We'll find one in the study."

Fort's dark eyes twinkled as Hildreth led the way back to the study. Tommy placed his guests in deep leather armchairs before the fire, and busied himself with decanter and siphon.

"Confidential agent, is it?" Sir William addressed Fort brusquely, "I think I've heard of ye. Black Fort, they call ye, don't they? I don't mind telling ye plain, I don't like what I've heard. There's too much confidentialness going on in our Foreign Office for my taste! Does the British Government stand behind the dirty jobs you do?"

"Never!" Fort assured him serenely, "in fact, they spend a lot of time repudiating me and all my works. But somebody's got

to do the dirty jobs. We can't all be pure white—ah—knights, can we, Sir William?"

Sir William sputtered. "Arrr-h! But this job you're on is very dirty, by all I hear. I'm a plain North-country man myself," he elaborated redundantly, "I coom from the bottom of things—I don't care who knows it—and I like to go to the bottom of things. What is this I heard over in Soviet Roosia you two are doing against the comeraids?"

"We?" Hildreth handed charged glasses to his guests, "but Mr. Fort and I are doing nothing against any comrades, Sir William. We are trying to stop an open breach of international agreement; to check the smuggling of opium into China!"

"Yaah!" Sir William snorted, "once the British Government and the capitalists have got rich off opium, they're mighty virtuous if any one else wants to get theirs, I notice! The Soviet kommissars explained all that to me—"

"Wait a minute, Sir William!" Fort leaned forward. The amusement had gone out of his level grey eyes. They held the little Yorkshireman's. "Did they also tell you that they are enslaving the workers of another nation, for their own profit?"

"Years ago England and the civilized nations agreed to reduce their shipments of opium to China progressively, until the traffic stopped entirely. To keep that agreement, England has sacrificed millions of revenue—and England needs money. Now the Soviets are undoing that work, smuggling in opium—"

"Well, it's their turn, isn't it?" Sir William demanded doggedly, "Roosian workmen have a right to profit, if English capitalists did!"

"And ruin Chinese workmen?" Fort countered. "For centuries the Chinese smoked and ate about fifty million pounds of opium a year—ten pounds per person—enough to make every man, woman and child in China a dope-fiend. Most of the drug they grew themselves. Now they grow practically none, and outside sources of supply are cut off."

"But the old craving is there. The Chinese may be starving, but they'll pay anything for opium. So the Soviets are growing miles of poppies in Semiretchinsk, across the frontier, and getting rich by drugging Chinese workers, instead of growing wheat and feeding them!"

"Eh? What?" Sir William sat up, rubbing his bald head, "you don't say! Well, I'm sure the kommissars I saw over there don't know that, for grander come-raids I never met. You're sure you're right?"

Fort shrugged his shoulders. "You should see Utch on a market-day. Every load of grain, or skins, or rugs from Soviet Turkestan conceals pounds of opium. The Chinese Collector winks at it, and takes his profits. But the Soviet kommissars have organized the trade, and get the money!"

"Well, by goom!" the little Yorkshireman bounced in his chair, "then it'll stop! You've not handled it right, maan! I'll go back there myself and tell the kommissars plain. They'll stop it—for straighter men to deal with—"

The abrupt banging open of the study door checked him. Tompkins appeared, his eyes excited, his face white.

"Excuse me, sir!" he panted, "but there's trouble in the village! They've been killing—"

"Killing? Whom?" Fort jumped to his feet, reaching Tompkins in a stride.

"Uluthoff, sir—the Kirghiz guide! Those Soviet chaps that came with Sir William did it, sir—then rode off hell for leather. They found Uluthoff at the inn, and they fair hacked him about. Cut off his head, they did—it's on the city gate, with the tongue cut out, and the ears off—"

Tompkins gagged, and showed signs of being sick. Fort clapped him on the back, though his own face was filled with horror.

"But what for? What pretext did they give? Buck up, man! Why?"

"All right, sir; sorry," Tompkins got hold of himself, "they said, sir, he'd done in a kommissar chap, name of Radski; betrayed him, or something. But really the Chinese Collector had him executed, sir. Radski's head is on the gate, next to Uluthoff's."

Fort's eyes met Hildreth's. His face was grim.

"All right, Tompkins," Hildreth said quietly, "thank you for reporting."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Tompkins withdrew in good order.

"SO THAT'S the Soviet for you," Tommy Hildreth commented bitterly, "hack an innocent man to pieces for a thing he never did!"

"But if he betrayed a kommissar to a

Chinaman who had him executed!" Sir William protested, "it's a hard rule, a life for a life. But if the man was a murderer, or worse—"

"As it happens, he wasn't," Fort interrupted coldly, "Uluthoff was nothing but a Kirghiz tribesman who guided me on my last opium raid into Semiretchinsk. He didn't betray Ratski."

"Eh? How do you know that?" Sir William demanded.

"Because I did it myself," Fort announced steadily. "Ratski was the head of a big opium-ring. I captured him and delivered him in a package supposed to be opium, to the Chinese Collector; for which I was paid ten thousand dollars."

Sir William's fat knees gave under him and he sat down suddenly, his round face aghast.

"And that's the way you've been handling this opium smuggling—murdering kommissars, and for pay! Black Fort, indeed! By goom, maan, that's black murder!"

Fort's heavy eyebrows drew together. "'A life for a life,' you said, Sir William. Ratski had killed Jim Douglas, an Englishman, with his own hands, when we were in prison together in Moscow."

"Ah, but that was war!"

"Was it? England was allied with Russia at the time. Jim Douglas was my best friend."

"Ay—you're a vengeful maan, Mr. Fort," Higgs' plump face was as stern as nature allowed, "you're no fit man for this job! Killing a kommissar! A comeraid! There you are!"

"No," he continued firmly, "this opium running shall be stopped. But it's Bill Higgs will stop it. I understand the Russian comeraids. I'll tell them the truth, and they'll believe me. I'll go back tomorrow."

"Will you? How will you go?" Fort asked. "The Soviet guards have already gone, as you heard. How are you going to find your way back through the mountains?"

The M. P.'s pudgy hands opened rather helplessly, and he looked at Tommy Hildreth. That young man, scenting something behind Fort's question, maintained a noncommittal silence and stared at the hearth-rug.

"Suppose we were able to round up Ulu-

thoff's Kirghiz tribesmen," Fort suggested, "his cousin Kashgaz is with them. They are reliable men, and they will be thirsting for—activity—after what has happened to Uluthoff. Suppose I could find you a guide who knows the passes?"

"What guide?" Sir William asked with quick distrust.

"The one you suspect—myself. There is no other. Well?"

Sir William shook his head and passed a hairy-backed hand over his bald crown. His pompous assurance had wilted a little.

"Maan," he said wearily, "you're a hard customer. I think I'll go to my bed—I'm that tired. If you'd let me have a bite to eat in my room, Mr. Hildreth, and a sup of summat to drink—"

His host led him away. Presently Hildreth came back to find Fort pacing the length of the little study.

"There's a god-send for you!" Fort exclaimed as Tommy came in, "the very maan I wanted, and never hoped would come my way!"

Tommy chuckled at Fort's mimicry of Sir William's voice, but he shook his head.

"God-send! Going over there and palavering? Promising those Soviet blighters the moon and sixpence, committing us to we've no idea what? Of course when the diplomatic trouble he stirs up begins in London, we'll be to blame for not forcibly restraining him!"

But Black Fort was laughing. "Don't you worry about diplomatic complications, Tommy," he recommended, "Comeraid Higgs is going to be very useful to us. Tell you how."

"You know old Selim, the Tajik merchant at Karakol? Rich old beggar—the one we caught bringing in opium in the shafts of his *tarantass* hollowed out for the purpose. Well, he's got a new trick. I heard it yesterday."

"He's going to import a lot of tribeswomen from Dzungaria to be 'married'—that is, sold—to the nomad Dzungars down in the oasis of the Takla Makas Desert, southeast of here. A big consignment of opium from the resident kommissar at Karakol is coming through with Selim's bartered brides—hidden under the women's draperies. I've got to get it—"

Tommy whistled. "But—that'll make trouble! You can't lay a hand on *them*! half the population of Utch is Moslem."

And to touch a Moslem woman's draperies
—psst!

He made a quick gesture of his hand across his throat.

"I know it. I can't take it off them. That's why I wanted to get back into Semiretchinsk. But considering that I burned up Ratski's house with his opium in it the last time I was there, it isn't exactly a healthy place for me to go visiting. Now as a humble follower of Sir William Higgs, M. P., Esquire, the welcome comeraid of all the big pots of the Soviet—"

"Hm-mm!" Tommy negatived, "too darn risky! Stick your head into the wolf's gullet for the sake of one shipment of opium? Nothing doing!"

"Look here, Tommy. It isn't just one shipment of opium. It's something more. What if I could—"

Fort leaned forward, poking the fire, and for five minutes he talked quietly. At the end of them Hildreth gave up.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly, "Tompkins' clothes are big enough to fit you, nearly, and he will shave you any way you like. But if they twig you, God help you—"

"Thanks," Fort smiled, "then if you can let me have a good sharp pair of shears, and a tube of glue, I'll be all set."

THE Tarantass of the British Vice-Consulate at Utch could not match the Soviet equipage for elegance; but it was a serviceable, sea-going vehicle, inured to hard labor over rough mountain roads. Dragged, rather than drawn by six stout hill-ponies, it rattled over the cobbles of Utch and out through the gates.

Overhead a cloud of kites wheeled, screamed and settled round a blond, bearded head with sightless eyes, set on a spike. Beneath the head were nailed two ears and a tongue. Sir Bill Higgs peeped, then hid himself behind the leather curtains of the *tarantass* to shut out the horrid sight.

Behind the knight rode some thirty Kirghiz from the steppes, mere rough bundles of burliness in their great sheepskin shubas, high shaggy caps and furlined boots. They formed a surprisingly strong guard for so peaceful an embassy; a mere errand of expostulation which was to put an end to an iniquitous, though profitable, practice.

Fort rode beside the *tarantass*. He was wrapped to the eyes in an old trench-faded overcoat which still showed the battered stripes of a sergeant-major on its dingy dun sleeve.

Tompkins' sheepskin cap with the wool inside was pulled well down over Fort's head, so that only a hawk-nose and two triangles of respectable mutton-chop whisker, turned grizzle-grey with kitchen flour over night, showed between collar and cap.

Snow had fallen in the night. So had the temperature; but the wind had not taken the hint. A fine grit of frozen particles, sleet as hard as sand, sand as cold as sleet, was hurled against the riders with all the force of an eighty-five-mile gale that howled down from the mountain passes.

"All right, Sir William?" Fort leaned down to the curtained cart to ask, "I had hot bricks put in the straw. You've found them?"

Sir William exposed one red cheek and a blue nose. "Ay. But it's nippin'. We have it cold on the Yorkshire moors, but this is the beat of me. I thought it would be hot down here, it's that near India."

"It is 'Sahara in summer, Siberia in winter,'" Fort quoted, "and winter from October to May. Last month you'd have struck sand-storms, and a heat of 104° in the shade. Tonight we'll be sixteen thousand feet above sea-level, and God-knows-what below zero!"

They were. For three days they fought their way through the snow-choked passes of the Tian Shan Mountains.

By main force the little convoy won through to the western slopes where lesser altitudes and warmer winds started the blood flowing again in their numbed limbs, and oozing from their cold-cracked faces.

The vast plains of Semiretchinsk spread out before them like a relief map. Down there lay risk for Fort. But he pushed ahead boldly, and swung at full gallop, harness jingling, *tarantass* rattling and leather curtains slatting into Karakol, drawing up with a flourish before the Soviet Kommissariat.

"Ho, there!" he shouted in Russian, making as much noise as possible, "Ho! His Excellency Sir William Higgs, M. P., Esquire, of England! To visit His Excellency the Soviet Kommissar of the District of Karakol!"

Half a dozen Soviet guards tumbled out of the doorway, among them Sir William's escort to Utch. Fort motioned them imperiously to the horses' heads. Then he flung himself from his mount and ceremoniously helped a stiffened and jolted Sir Bill out of the cart and up the low steps of the kommissar's residence.

"Give it to him hot!" he muttered in the little knight's ear, "straight from the shoulder! Make him see what they're doing to ruin the Chinese proletariat! I'll be round to get you out before they do you any real harm—"

"Stoof!" Sir William snorted indignantly, "harm *me*? You've got the wrong attitood toward them, maan—the aristocrat's attitood!"

"All right, you fix it!" Fort stepped hastily back to let him pass through the door. Behind the knight's back he bowed low and respectfully, a gesture which hid his face.

Out of the corner of his eye he had caught sight of a broad, whiskered face of distinctly Jewish cast, scrutinizing him through the parted curtains at the window. Fort knew a kommissar when he saw one.

He swung quickly to horse and clattered off with his Kirghiz escort, heading for an inn on the outskirts of the town. Both he and his men were known at the principal *traktir*.

At the inn he ordered unlimited food and sufficient drink for his Kirghizs' satisfaction before he strolled outside. He motioned to Kashgaz, the leader who had replaced his murdered cousin Uluthoff, and the man followed him.

"You saw those two Red Guards at the kommissar's," Fort questioned softly in Jagatai, the common language of Turkestan, "the ones who—"

"Akh!" the Kirghiz spat on the ground, and there was murder in his eyes, "the blood of my kinsmen screamed at me from their hands—"

"All right! Take it easy. They were but servants. Their master who commanded the murder was that kommissar who was peeping out of the window at me. He also commands one Selim the Merchant, a Tajik. Leave the servants to their slavery. But would you strike at the master—by my hand?"

Kashgaz's eyes gleamed hatred and his

bearded lips drew back in a snarling grin.

"These Russians!" he muttered, "these dung-hill dogs who lord it over us! They are only a handful pushing like weeds among our thousands, and yet they choke us all, strangle us! And call it making a revolution to deliver us—"

"Listen!" Fort cut him short. In a few swift sentences he outlined to Kashgaz the rough plan he had been forming. The Kirghiz listened attentively, his little eyes fixed on Fort. Suddenly he bent double, smiting his huge thighs with his hairy fists, and emitting a hoarse roar of gargantuan laughter.

"Sshh!" Fort hushed him, his own face twisted with mirth, "go back and tell your kinsmen quietly what I expect of them. Eat. Sleep. When the time comes I will call you."

FOR all the changes the centuries have wrought in Western Turkestan, the country might still be shut up in the pages of the Old Testament, with the activities of Soviet Republicanism representing only a few scratches on the closed cover. In their dress, their lives, their thoughts the people still linger in Bible times.

Those who toil are Uzbeks, flat-faced and squat, half Turk, half Mongolian-Tartar. They are literal hewers of wood and drawers of water for their arch-nosed Aryan betters, the Tajiks. Tajik is the name given to the pure-blood aboriginal race who are still the land-owners, the priests and the merchants of Turkestan.

In times past, Persians, Indians, Mongols, Turks, Kalmucks and Torgods have crowded into Turkestan. Now they are mixed in an indistinguishable blend of mongrel blood; but all accept the Moslem religion of the country. Last, and incalculably least in numbers, have come the Russians. Foreign in speech and faith, they dominate the whole in the name of "government by the proletariat."

The Tajik merchant, Selim, lived in a house befitting his dignity and wealth, on the outskirts of the town. Its whitened walls enclosed the cloistered dwelling built round a spacious courtyard on which the lattice-screened windows of the women's quarters looked down, Arab fashion.

Night had fallen when Fort knocked at the wide, iron-bound portal of Selim's

house. To the door-keeper he gave word that he had come with an urgent message from the Chinese Collector at Utch, to be delivered to Selim in person.

Returning, the doorkeeper led Fort up the narrow stairs and ushered him into an upper room of surprising magnificence. The silken rugs and cushions on the Muznud divan, on which Selim sat, would have stung with envy the heart of any European collector.

But under the mask of luxury, Fort noted that the room was built like a fortress chamber. Deep window embrasures showed the thickness of the walls. Exquisitely wrought iron grills made the windows impassable. The heavy wooden door was thickly studded with polished nails; bound and bolted with steel. A sumptuously disguised prison, it might be, or a steel-toothed trap.

Without rising from his cross-legged position, Selim saluted his guest with grave dignity. The merchant's penetrating dark eyes scrutinized Fort minutely, his fine old hawk-nose sharpening. He reminded Fort of a venerable old spider. His white wool robes billowed about him, his patriarchal beard flowed down from the edge of his carefully folded turban to the wide sash about his middle.

With the long ring-bedecked hand that held his tarbosh stem, Selim waved his unusual guest to a seat beside him.

"SIR," bowing deeply Fort addressed him in Jagatai, "will you please send your servant back to his post? What I have to say to you is for no other ears."

Selim waved. The doorkeeper disappeared, closing the door behind him. As he did so, Fort knew the trap was set, and he was in it. His walking out depended on his own adroitness, or the old spider's credulity, on which he counted little. He went straight to the attack.

"I am the guide," he stated, "whom Chang Liang the Collector has sent to conduct you and your—party—to Utch."

"Conduct me?" Selim's keen eyes widened a trifle, then half closed, "but I know the way. I need no guide."

"I know it," Fort agreed promptly, "I only said that to get in here, and in case the porter was listening. Permit me—a moment."

He stepped to the door, looked out, closed it, and shot the steel bolt on the inside. Selim started from the divan, and rose to his feet; his hand outstretched toward a gong of polished bronze beside him.

"Don't bang that thing," Fort recommended quietly, "it makes too much noise for our business. Besides, I have my revolver trained on your middle at this moment."

Selim sat down again with Oriental impassibility to await Fort's explanation.

"I have really come to do you a favor," Fort went on. "I know that you are taking a party of women to Utch, to be distributed to their Dzungan countrymen in the desert; and that they are to carry some six hundred pounds of opium from the kommissar here to the Collector Chung Liang. Is that not true?"

"You tell me so." Selim's eyes were enigmatic.

"You know it is. But this you do not know. The Dzungans have heard of this opium—your party will never reach Utch. They intend to ambush you at a spot I know of, and to rob you of both women and opium."

Selim's lips curled in a smile and his arched eyebrows rose. Fort went on quickly.

"Why do I tell you this? Because I have a plan for getting both your women and your opium in safety to Utch. There is an English Sir now in Karakol visiting the kommissar. He is a fool, but fools have their purposes. He can be made to take your women and your opium back to Utch under his protection.

"It is I who will arrange this matter. The opium shall be slipped in under the very noses of the Englishmen watching to stop it. But you must be ready tonight."

The merchant allowed a gleam of interest to appear in his eyes.

"Tonight," he said thoughtfully, "and what do you expect in return?"

Fort shrugged. "Money. One tenth of the profits on the opium—and on the women."

"Ah. And who are you?"

"I am the servant of the English Sir. He speaks no Jagatai, and he trusts me. I will tell him that they are poor women going to join their husbands, who ask the protection of his escort. He will believe me."

A TOUCH of scorn tinged Selim's smile. He closed his eyes, caressing his venerable beard with long jewelled fingers, and sucked at his pipe-stem. His smile deepened into a satirical grin.

"My friend," he said, "you are ingenious. You are also a liar. You are not a servant. You are John Fort, the black watchdog of the English."

"I knew you the moment you crossed my threshold. You should have known better than to try so childish a trick as a disguise on an old hand like me. You have insulted my intelligence."

So that card was no good. Fort concentrated his mind on the droning Oriental voice, repeating the soft liquid tones to himself, catching the inflection of its rise and fall.

"But you have also given me some useful information," Selim went on, "about the Dzungan ambush. Hospitality demands a return in kind. Here is my information."

"Your English Sir, who is in truth a fool, will not return to Utch tonight, because he is at this moment in the little temporary jail at the back of the kommissar's house."

If Selim expected surprise, he missed his effect. Fort nodded.

"Your Sir," the merchant emphasized, "spoke many silly words to the kommissar; and when the kommissar showed him how silly they were, he used words even more silly; swindler, betrayer, murderer, and many more. He offered to knock the kommissar's unmentionable head off, and did, it seems, knock out two of his teeth and close one of his eyes. Hence—"

"Good old Bill Higgs!"

Selim opened his eyes to find his own grin reflected on Fort's face.

"An excellent man, as you say, but a fool. Indeed, all you English seem stricken with folly," Selim continued serenely. "The Sir threatened the kommissar with the wrath of England when the Labor Party heard of his imprisonment; but of course they will never hear. He will be reported as having met with an accident—unfortunately fatal. No doubt there will be truth in the report."

Still fondly stroking his silken beard, the merchant went on smiling.

"I tell you all this because naturally you could not now expect to leave this room alive. You decided that when you bolted that door."

Again Fort nodded comprehendingly.

"The kommissar had already sent me word that Mr. Fort was in Karakol, and I was expecting your visit," Selim's voice sharpened a trifle, "my people have orders as to what to do to you in case of the slightest commotion. But by locking that door you oblige me to deal with you myself. That will be less pleasant—for you."

Fort was staring at his boots, almost regretfully. It was a moment before he spoke.

"You or me, then?" he said at last, his face darkening to grimness, "I am sorry. You are a worthy antagonist, Selim. How do you propose to do it?"

Selim tapped the jeweled handle of the curved dagger in his sash. "But not at once. I have long wanted to meet you; and I find you entertaining."

"As I find you," Fort bowed gravely, his eyes steely, "but unfortunately, I am in a hurry. Perhaps we had better get on with it. My gun against your knife. Aren't you taking long chances, in spite of all your preparations? It will do you no good that I be hacked to pieces, when you are—dead."

Selim's smile did not dim. "You will not shoot me in this house," he said easily, "too noisy. I have a hundred guards here; and it will not profit you to shoot me, when the consequences to you will be—as you say."

Fort looked down at his gun; then he tossed it to the end of the room, a useless thing. His face was bitter, as if he did not relish defeat. With his empty hands outstretched, palm up, he stepped toward Selim.

The merchant watched him with a smile of cynical amusement. The English were indeed cursed with madness. This man, reputed to be clever, had walked into a death-trap armed with nothing but stupid lies and a crude, noisy weapon. Now he was disarmed, approaching his master with beggar hands out, a supplicating captive. The Oriental allowed him to approach very near, enjoying his humiliation.

The Englishman was muttering something under his breath, in his own language.

"It's a rotten trick," Fort was saying, "and I hate to do it to you. But—"

Something flashed down from Fort's big coat-sleeve. His left hand darted out and

grasped Selim's patriarchal beard. With a quick slash of sharp scissors, half the bushy growth parted from the merchant's startled face.

"Allah ul Allah! My beard!" Horrified, the stricken Tajik's hands flew to his face. His beard, his sacred beard! To touch a Moslem's beard—insult, almost sacrilege! "Allah ul Allah!" he choked, both hands clasped to his denuded chin. "Allah ul Allah! Thou vandal—"

The scissors dropped. Fort's arm drew back, and the impact of his fist on an unprotected jaw put the merchant out of his misery for the time being.

Fort listened. No sound came from the armed house. But the most difficult of his task lay ahead if he was to get out of it alive, and carry with him the booty for which he had come. And there was need for haste.

WORKING fast, he stripped the unconscious Selim of robes, turban and fine morocco leather boots, and pulled off his own outer clothing. He slipped into Selim's robes with easy familiarity, and dressed Selim in the trousers, boots, trench coat and cap he had worn.

Then carefully he sheared off the rest of Selim's beard and trimmed the stubble to grizzled mutton-chops. Using the polished gong as a mirror he stuck Selim's long beard carefully to his own jaw with the help of the tube of photographer's glue carried in his pocket.

The resemblance was passable in the dim light. Fort's dark eyes, bronzed skin and hawk nose were enough like Selim's, and the flowing robes concealed his spare frame, giving him the necessary portliness. Their height was about equal.

He had brought a length of rope inside his coat. He trussed Selim securely, gagged him with a wadded handkerchief, dragged him into the shadows and laid him with his face to the wall.

Going to the door, he slipped back the bolt and picked up his gun. Then he struck the gong a resounding bang, and seated himself cross-legged on the divan.

"Send the head-woman of the *Zenana* to me," he bade the servant who entered, modulating his voice carefully to Selim's Oriental drone, "and bid them make the carts ready. We travel tonight—within the hour. I take no guards and no drivers.

Have each span's lead-reins tied to the cart ahead. I myself will lead."

The man's eyes were lowered respectfully. They fell on the body of Selim, lying in the shadows.

"You may take that away," Fort waved his hand toward Selim, "when I am gone."

The servant's eyes followed Fort's hand. It was bare. He had forgotten Selim's rings!

"The infidel dog tried to steal my jewels," Fort drawled softly in Selim's voice, caressing his beard with Selim's gesture. "I have put them in a safe place. He met the fate deserved by the thieving—or by curious servants!"

The man salaamed and withdrew, shivering. Fort breathed a sigh of relief.

When the old crone in charge of the harem entered, she thought she saw her master, smoking sleepily. He gave his directions indolently, but minutely. Thirty women were to go in the carts; each was to carry twenty pounds of opium concealed under her robes, and each was to wear two face-veils.

"Mind that," he pointed out, "two *yashmaks* each; when they are in the carts, in one hour, bring me word."

"But these are new orders," the crone grumbled, "only today you bade me—"

"And tonight you question?" Fort purred. His fingers were safely buried in his beard, this time, "there are cords which cut off idle questions, cushions which stop waggling old tongues—"

He wondered if he was overdoing the threats. The old woman was bent double as she crept out, but she darted a swift look behind her from the door, and Fort saw doubt in her eyes. Before she shuffled away to the women's quarters she ran down to the door-keeper's lodge and exchanged a few muttered words with the man on guard there.

For an endless, nervous hour Fort sat smoking apparently placidly, drinking coffee from a tray beside the divan. The woman returned, her eyes darting malignant questions. He rose, wrapping himself in Selim's thick burnouse, and descended the narrow stairs.

The carts were drawn up in the courtyard, and to Fort's relief, the outer gate stood open. The door-keeper held Selim's horse. Majestically Fort took the leading rein and the heavy cart whip from him

and swung into the saddle. But the door-keeper still held the horse's head.

"Let go, fool!" Fort commanded.

The man stared up into his face. Their eyes met and held for a breathless second as Fort looked down. The doorkeeper gasped. He had read the truth. The soul behind those eyes, stern, cold, austere, was not the luxurious, cunning Oriental soul of Selim.

The doorman's mouth opened to emit a betraying shout. Instantly Fort's heavy whip-handle came down, taking him full on the stretched gullet. The cry came out in a gurgling cluck.

The door-keeper staggered back. Fort struck spurs into his horse and the train of carts jerked forward, dashing out into the street.

Gazing after the disappearing rider with awe, the door-keeper spread out his hands in fatalistic resignation. He had met a master. If that master was not Selim, that was not his affair. Allah ul Allah!

AN UNGUARDED string of carts creaked its way through the snow of winding passes that led down from the eastern mountain-slopes of the Tian Shan range to end finally on the plateau far below, at Utch.

No outriders convoyed the carts. Only a solitary horseman, hooded and muffled in his thick white wool burnouse rode at the head of the caravan. Even he was obviously old, for a long grey beard swept his breast. He urged the horses forward as if in hot haste to be safely at the end of his journey.

"Our Selim groweth old," growled one of the band of Dzungsans, crouched behind boulders at the turn of the pass, "he rides today without armed men. The old dog looses his teeth!"

"Old dog, yes! But age must come to all of us," the leader reminded, "and he had no way of knowing that we should meet him on the way, or that we knew he carried opium. No one knew, but the Black Englishman who told us. And no one would want our women but us—"

"Allah! The ugly hags he brings us, and expects silver-dust for them! It is robbery!"

"Sel! Sound carries over this snow. Let the carts get past us, then shoot Selim down from behind. There is no need to

frighten the women, or to set the horses running. We can use them, and the carts. The fewer shots the better."

The carts were nearing. The screech of their wheels on the dry snow sounded distinctly as they slithered down the narrow gorge, came abreast of the hidden tribesmen, creaked past one by one.

"There are no drivers," the leader whispered, "the women are driving from the carts. Do you see?"

Humped, muffled women's figures in the black draperies of Moslem orthodoxy crouched behind the leather curtains. At sight of them the Dzungsans' eyes glistened. They might be neither very beautiful nor in the least young, but they were women—

"Now!" urged a dozen guttural voices, "shoot! And we will get them!"

At the first hoarse shout the burnoused figure on horseback whirled. While the Dzungan leader's Russian rifle leaped to his shoulder, fire spat from under the white burnouse, and the gun shattered in his hands.

The Dzungsans sprang up. From the carts of the women a point-blank volley caught them all unprepared. Women with rifles? It was unheard of! For an instant they fell back. The leader's shout rallied them to swift action.

"Club them! Don't shoot—don't kill the women!"

Cursing, the attackers jumped for the carts, their rifles clubbed. Horses plunged and screamed, wagons overturned, clumsy bundles of black draperies tumbled out into the snow. Hoarse shouts, yells and oaths filled the air as a mass of struggling figures rolled and fought amid the thrashing legs of the horses.

Seated on his mount and unattacked, the man in the white burnouse swayed and rocked in what appeared to be agony, clasping himself as if he had been struck in a vital spot. His cries rang out over the combat, and he doubled forward in a convulsion, tears running down his face and freezing in his beard.

Arms and legs wound in yards of torn and tattered veils, a huge Dzungan fought his way out of the mass bearing in his arms a gasping, swaddled captive. He made a dash for the rocks where the raiders' horses were hidden and got a foot into his stirrup in spite of the flailing arms and legs of the prize he bore.

"Hold on there!" the man in the white burnouse shouted through his paroxysms of laughter, "stop kicking! Tear off your face-veil!"

The captive heard, and grabbed at the *yashmak*. It came away with a wrench, revealing a red face bristling with sandy mutton-chop whiskers and a spiky walrus mustache.

"Allah ul Allah!" burst from a horrified Dzungan, "my woman is bearded! My woman is a man!"

He hurled the horrid thing from him, leaped on his horse and spurred like a mad-dened creature down the pass. A dozen, a score of hoarse cries of rage and disgust burst from the writhing mass of struggling figures as Dzungan after Dzungan tore a veil from an antagonist's face to find it covered with a crackling Kirghiz beard.

With startling rapidity the process of disentanglement was accomplished, and the rattle of the Dzungans' retreating hoof-beats thundered down the pass.

"AY! IT'S a grand thing to travel! I had to come all this way and see it myself to believe the iniquity going on behind the mask of brotherhood in that Soviet Republic!

"What my old 'ooman—Lady Higgs, that is—I'll say when I tell her that I only got out by the fringe of my skirts—and my whiskers—don't bear thinking about! But I spoke my mind to that kommissar, and I'll speak it again, when I get back to the Old Country. Comeraids! Dirty murdering blackguards!"

"More power to you, Sir William!" Fort laughed as Tommy Hildreth filled their glasses before the study fire in the residency in Utch.

"Bill it is, Johnny!" Sir William waved his glass, "and more dirty work to you, by goom! I don't know a better lad for it! Lord, when I think—"

A gurgling chuckle choked off utterance for a moment. "If you'd seen it, Tommy," he sputtered, "me shivering in my oonderwear in that Soviet out-house prison, the Kommissar having taken my good tweed

suit and my two-hundred-guinea fur coat, not to mention my watch and all my money!

"And suddenly, here's this Black Jack Fort, all got up in his old whiskers, with his hands on the bars of the window—and up with his fist, and smashes the bars like matches! They were nowt but wood, painted black, and me too down in the dooms to have a try at them. He had me dragged through the window in no time, and off up the road!

"And there in a barn, thirty Kirghiz and me dressing up in flumadoodle veils, while thirty squalling women climbs into the men's breeches behind a partition, and starts off home like that—"

"They had extra *yashmak* veils, so they can face their tribes with their modesty intact," Fort explained, "and Kashgaz could be relied on to see that they got safely back to their own people. Most of them had been stolen from their homes, and were glad to go back."

"It fair broke those Kirghiz's hearts when all that opium went up in smoke on the hills," Sir Bill shook his head regretfully, "worth good money! But it's grand work you laads are doing!"

"But how did you get hold of the women?" Tommy asked curiously.

"Stole them from Selim," Fort stated laconically.

"And where did you get the whiskers for your disguise?"

"Stole them off Selim's face."

Sir Bill stared at him in awe and admiration.

"Well," he said, "you're a great man. But I wish you could have got my fur coat back for me! It's the first I ever had."

Fort stretched his legs lazily. "By the way," he drawled, "I called on the kommissar—as Selim, naturally—to tell him I had outwitted Black Fort. He called me a vain Oriental; that is, a liar. There was a slight unpleasantness, and the kommissar—went to sleep. I stole your fur coat off his back. You'll find it hanging in the hall. Your watch and your money are in the pockets."

Disinherited

*A Western Novelette about Two
Brothers—the Weak and the Strong*

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

CHAPTER I

FAREWELL

ON A RISE in the road Don Fraser checked his horse, turned in the saddle, and looked back. He could see the ranch house, gray from the weather of many years, leaning just a little in its old age, yet sturdy with a long stretch of sheltering life remaining to it. Beyond the house his eyes traveled over the alfalfa fields, just mowed for the second time. Beyond the fields those swift eyes took in the flats and then the hills which lifted themselves into mountains, some brown, some tree-clad against the horizon. The sky which rose from the peaks was sun-drenched by the climbing, brassy orb.

This had been home to Don Fraser through all his twenty-nine years—and he was leaving it. He had been born in that house. He had spent his boyhood, his youth, and his young manhood in it. Now he was to be a stranger to it. He had never felt that he had a right in the house. He had had no need of such a feeling. He would as soon have thought of his right to breathe the mountain air. But now, since the house was to know him no more, that

feeling came to him, sorrowfully, desolately.

If ever a man had had a rightful inheritance, this house and all the land about it, should have been his inheritance. His father had built that house. He had brought his wife, Don's mother, to it. Don had first seen the light in it, had learned to creep in it, had learned to walk in it; had learned in it and on the land that surrounded it, about all he had ever learned. His mother had died in it; his father, just lately, had died in it. It was the only home Don Fraser had ever known, and now he was a man without a home. He was pretty nearly a man without a cent in the world, too. He owned nothing but the roan horse beneath him, the clothes he wore, and a few personal belongings in his saddle roll.

Thus this ranch was a goodly heritage for any man, but it was not a heritage for Don, though he was his father's first-born. Don's mother had not survived his birth more than five years. She had been a gentle woman, and she had slipped gently out of life. Don's father had devotedly loved the boy, but he had been a busy man, and Don had brought himself up under the careless eye of the cook.



When Don was eight his father had brought home a new wife. He had rather shamefacedly presented Don to her, and he had made the mistake of not taking the boy aside and explaining matters to him. Don had looked askance at his new mother. His strongest impression was that she was not a mother at all. He came to that conclusion simply because she was so different from the mother whom he was already only dimly beginning to remember. She was a woman of sharp visage and of sharper tongue. She scolded Don at first, but when Don's half brother was born she ignored Don.

To make matters worse Don's father, strong man though Don had always thought him, was dominated by the new wife and mother. Don had seen his father meekly take a tongue lashing from her. The boy reflected that he had seen his father go for his gun on at least one occasion when a man had said less to him than this woman was saying. That bred a certain, definite feeling in Don about women. A man must accept whatever punishment a woman saw fit to inflict on him. He must not rebel against any medicine, however bitter, which she saw fit to give him.

Don was eighteen and his half brother was ten when Don first noticed a change in his father. He suddenly became aware that his father's hair had grayed and his shoulders had stooped. His eyes were not so keen as they had been. He had a habit of peering. There was no calculation in what Don offered to do for his father. The boy's heart had been starved for affection. His father had long ceased to offer him any paternal love, but Don had not turned from his father on that account. He had a dim notion that a man had to care for somebody.

So he went to his father and offered to take the burden of the ranch from his father's shoulders. The father had gladly slipped the burden to Don. Unknown to Don, he had been watching the boy and speculating about his ability. He had seen that he had no rider who could compare to Don. He had seen that Don could cast a rope with the best of them. He could handle a gun. Most important of all, Don seemed not to be afraid of anything. The father said that fear was not in the son.

Don had given no thought as to how his stepmother would take this shift in authority. If he had thought about it, he would

have supposed that she would be glad to see a younger, firmer hand guiding the destinies of the ranch. He had been a man in authority for several months when he first observed that his stepmother was watching him. She was watching him, but when the stepbrother was near by her glance went from Don to the younger boy. There was something unfathomable in her eyes then.

THEN his father died, quite suddenly, in his chair, after supper, his pipe in his hand. After the funeral Don had gone about his business again. He knew nothing of legal technicalities. He supposed the ranch was his. He told himself that if ever a man and a ranch were tied up together he and this ranch were. He had given all his young manhood to it. It had had all his thought and his labor. Why should it not be his?

But it was not his. It had never occurred to him that his father had left a will. He didn't know anything about wills. He supposed property just descended from father to son and that was all there was to it. His mother broke the news to him and told him he could verify it by consulting a certain lawyer at the county seat. Nothing, Don asked, was his? Nothing was his, his stepmother agreed. And she added:

"I s'pose you are quittin'. I s'pose you are goin' to leave your father's wife to shift for herself with a nineteen-year-old boy on her hands."

Don was proud but he was not haughty. He was not selfish. He had never had a dream of riches. He had simply gone on working from year to year, taking things as they came. Naturally he was disappointed that this property was not his, for he loved it. He knew every inch of it, loved every inch of it. His fancy could flee from mountain peak to the quiet sitting room, and he could take a particular comfort from peak and room. All the associations of his life were here. Yet disappointment was not the emotion he yielded to now. He was stung by his stepmother's imputation.

"I'm stayin' on," he said. "I'll do the best I can for you an' Robert."

That "Robert" perhaps indicated the status of the young stepbrother. It had never been shortened to "Bob", an unheard of thing. Mrs. Fraser would not permit

the shortening. She had tongue-lashed the one puncher who had attempted it. Nor did Don reflect that Robert was no longer a boy. At Robert's age Don had been a full-fledged man in the saddle.

At his reply the stepmother had smiled, enigmatically. Don could not read the meaning in enigmatic smiles. He went about his business. He worked harder than ever. The ranch prospered in the next two years as it had never prospered before.

And then the stepmother had died, a month before this morning on which Don sat his horse on the rise. She had not died suddenly as Don's father had died. She had had six weeks of lingering illness in bed. She had had time to arrange matters, though Don now shrewdly suspected that matters needed little arrangement. The lawyer whom she had referred Don to but whom he had not consulted was at the ranch house on three occasions. On the last he had had two other men with him. There had been a requisition for ink and paper. The lawyer had come out of the sick room with a folded sheet in his hands. He had looked at Don oddly but had gone his way without a word.

The news that was broken to Don after his stepmother's funeral was no news. He was not a dullard, and he had known what those legal visits had meant. Therefore when the lawyer came and told him that the stepmother had willed the ranch and everything appertaining thereunto to Robert, Don had squared his shoulders like a man who takes a blow standing solidly on his feet. Though he had had a prevision that this blow would be dealt him, it was nevertheless a severe blow. He had definitely lost the place that was dearer to him even than it had been when his father had died. Well, he couldn't stay on here. There were some things a man couldn't stand. Don could not stand this close association, with the knowledge that he was an alien. Why, he would be no more here than one of the rambling punchers who worked from one pay day to another.

"I'm ridin'," he told the lawyer.

"Quitting?" the legal gentleman sneered.

Don, on occasion, had a direct and challenging gray eye. He regarded the lawyer coldly now.

"When you call me a quitter, you are ready to back it up, are you?" he asked softly.

This was a man-to-man matter. There was no woman in it. Don had learned how to handle man-to-man matters.

"Oh," said the lawyer hastily, "no. I meant that I hoped you wouldn't leave."

Don turned his back on him, and the lawyer went his way. Don sought out Robert and told him he would be riding in one week from that day. Robert looked at him fearfully.

These two were in marked contrast as they faced each other. Don had long ago come to a man's full physical estate. He had come to it powerfully, too. He was broad of shoulder and lean of thigh. Youth still bloomed in his face. His blood was thoroughly oxygenated, and that blood bloomed redly in his cheeks, lying thickly under his tan. His gray eyes were clear and generally cool. Only when he was unusually thoughtful did that coolness die out of them. Then they were somewhat somber; for there were a good many things which Don did not understand. This little blur in his mind did not affect him physically, however. Physically he was as nearly perfect as a man ever is. No horse had yet thrown him. He was an expert with a rope. He could unerringly speed a bullet. And because he had had to work so hard, he had been untouched by any rowdyism. He had had little time to spend in town. A number of times he had had to defend himself, but he had never sought entrance to a quarrel.

Robert was slender and half a head shorter than Bob. His mother had sheltered him and he was rugged neither in mind nor in body. When he rode, he rode a horse which had definitely been gentled. He did try to practice with a rope, but he roped a post oftener than he roped a speeding steer. He was shy of firearms. He had his mother's dark eyes; and the sharpness of her features became a kind of delicacy in his. He had her soft blond hair, too. In another environment, differently reared, he might have been a "nice" boy. Here he was out of his element.

"BUT, Don, what am I going to do?" he asked now.

"Oh, you'll get along," Don answered. "You just leave things to ol' Bunn. He will look out for 'em for you."

"I wish you'd stay," Robert said.

Don was vaguely sorry for him. He

realized that he had been vaguely sorry for him all along. That uncertain feeling made him uncomfortable. There were some things a man couldn't stand, however, and in this case Don could not bear to remain here. He had never been more than a forty-dollar-a-month puncher, and, God knew, he had earned at least a foreman's wages. However, he would not voice that to Robert. There were some things a man didn't put into words. Don despised a man who whined, and he had a notion that this would be a sort of whining. So he smiled.

"I got to be strikin' out for myself, Robert," he said. "I'm twenty-nine. When a man turns into his thirties, he is gettin' along, you know."

"You going far?" Robert asked.

"Dunno. I'm ridin'. I'll see what's around the corner."

Well, he had not thought of that before. He had never been far from this ranch. The big, outside world was vague to him. Gosh mebbe he could see a few interestin' things out there. So he had ridden away, his horse beneath him, his saddle roll behind him.

He had glowed a little at the thought of riding into new country and seeing what was there, but the glow did not last. As a shadow over the sun dims sunshine, so a shadow dimmed that glow. Yes, he was free. He was free of Bess Graham, but there was no joy in that. Bess Graham had become the one girl in his life as his father had been the one man. She lived down the mountains ten miles. Her father and Don's father had been close friends. Don and Bess had known each other for years. Don often went to Graham's with his father and later alone. Bess often came to the Fraser ranch with her father and once in a while alone. There was no engagement between her and Don, but there was something stronger than a formal engagement, Don felt. It was a kind of bond. They were so at ease when they were alone, and Don had never been at ease with any other girl or woman. He had given a good deal of thought as to how he was going to forge ahead, so that sometime he could marry Bess. He had not forged ahead. He was now twenty-nine and practically penniless. Bess was twenty-one, an only child; and her father had one of the best ranches in all this country.

Don had seen Bess shortly after his father had died. He had left everything to Bess on that occasion. He had avoided her eyes. He was sure that Bess was different from what she had been in the past. That bond between them was sure busted.

When Bess was leaving he walked out to her horse. Bitterness was in his soul.

"You heard the news, didn't you," he asked. "I'm no better off than the poorest puncher. I reckon I won't be ridin' over your way no more."

He had never thought Bess meek. In fact Bess was pretty spirited. As he looked up at her he saw her lips curl.

"Who asked you to?" she demanded.

Well, he didn't blame her. Marriage between them was impossible now anyhow. He couldn't ask to marry him a girl who would have a lot of land, a great many cattle, money in the bank.

And so he had not ridden over to the Graham ranch, and Bess had not ridden over to the Fraser place. A curious thing happened to Don then. The present Bess, especially that Bess who had looked down at him scornfully from her horse, faded from his recollection. He remembered a curly-headed, impudent little girl, who sometimes tortured him and was sometimes kind to him.

Ho, hum, he could not sit here forever, looking back at what was not his. He must be riding on. Damn it, he would have a whirl at the big outside world. He shook himself as if he were breaking the chains which bound him and were letting the links fall to the ground. In that moment Don was different from anything he had ever been before. He had accepted freedom. Maybe he would raise some hell.

CHAPTER II

TWO MEN, TWO GIRLS

H E RODE for two miles and came round the shoulder of a squat hill. He was not aware that he was coming on anyone till he saw a man and a girl in the narrow road before him. He knew the man, though he had never passed a word with him. The girl he thought he did not know, though there was something familiar about her.

The man was squat and he was unkempt. His face had a swarthy appearance, but

that was not natural to it. It was the face of a man who rode much in sand and washed little. There was a stubble of beard on the face, and a brown mustache sprouted raggedly from the upper lip. The man had a cast in one eye, and though his regard was bent on the girl, it seemed to Don that he had an eye on himself also. He was roughly dressed in faded overalls, run-down boots, blue shirt, nondescript vest, and regulation hat. His horse was a grayish brown, a color which, especially at a distance, could merge with almost any landscape.

Don had seen this man many times in the village and sometimes on the road. In these encounters he had not even spoken to the man. On the first occasion the fellow had given him an inquiring look as if he would speak if Don did. After that he did not look at Don. Don knew him by reputation. He was said to be a kind of cattle rustler. There was little chance in this country for the rustling of steers. An animal with a blotted brand could not be got out of the country, but more than one ranchman in the last two years had been surprised at the scantiness of his calf crop. There was a report that this Renshaw was a hole-in-the-wall fellow, who had a hide-out in the mountains. He was reputed to have half a dozen followers. They never appeared in town. A further report was to the effect that Renshaw was secretly building up a herd from the calves he stole. Since his alleged pilferings had been going on for two years, it was said that his herd was of fairly good size now. There had been several carefully planned hunts for the man's hiding place, and twice he had been followed. He had easily eluded his followers, however, when he had got into the mountains. Apparently he knew more about the mountains than the ranchers did.

Don had never been interested in him, for the good reason that Don had never missed any calves. Since his ranch was small, Don was able to keep check on his stock. They ranged in the mountains in summer and were as open to theft as the animals of any other rancher, but for some reason or other Don had been immune. He had accepted his immunity without question. If he thought about it at all, he believed that he played in luck.

The girl whom Renshaw now confronted was as different from him as any girl could

be from any man. She was smartly garbed, and her black horse had a polished coat. She was bareheaded, and Don saw that her hair was as dark and as sleek as the horse's. As he stopped his horse, she turned toward him, and Renshaw's glance followed hers. The girl's cheeks, Don saw, were flushed and her eyes were bright. Flush and brilliance, he believed, were only signs of anger. When Renshaw saw Don sitting his horse there in silence, Renshaw's lips curled. His eyes, however, had a questioning look.

Don easily perceived that something had happened between the man and the girl. He did not think it was a quarrel. A quarrel would indicate familiarity of a sort. Then the man must have been doing something which the girl resented.

It was all none of Don's business, unless the girl needed protection. Then it would be very much his business. He could, however, only wait. If the girl needed his help she would doubtless let him know. One thing he could say for this girl: She was not scared. Some of the light of anger died out of her eyes, and a look of contempt came to take the place of the anger. Also she was kinda bossy.

"Ride up here," she ordered Don.

Don had been duty's servant for quite a while now. Unconsciously he had become rather tired of the dull round of duty. No one had bossed him, but he had been fettered just the same. He had borne the exacting burden of a ranch and had been paid puncher's wages. Just a moment ago he had been buoyed a little by his sense of freedom. Now this girl was giving him orders as if he were the mere hired man he looked to be.

However, she was a girl. She might need him. He rode up to her. Because her tone had been so imperious there was a thin smile on his lips.

"This man has been bothering me," the girl said. "He stopped me in the road here and asked me who I was and where I had come from. If I'd had a gun or a quirt—"

She stopped and blazed a look at Renshaw.

"Oh, now, I—" Renshaw began.

Don and girl each spoke a word simultaneously. Each stopped to make way for the other. Don looked at her, his head a little inclined.

"Go on," she said, nodding curtly. Don looked at Renshaw.

"Shut up," he said.

"I—" Renshaw again.

"He kinda held you up, ma'am?" Don asked the girl.

"Overtook me. Wheeled his horse. I couldn't pass him."

The kind of life Don had been forced to lead had bred caution in him. To make a go of the ranch he had had to do a great deal of close figuring. He had scarcely had time for anything but his work. Now that new sense of freedom whirled through him like a flame, and this was not at all caused by the fact that this pretty girl had appealed to him. She was pretty for a fact. She bore close inspection very well. And the ire which Renshaw had roused in her did not dim her beauty. Don realized that it didn't make a bit of difference to himself or to anybody else what he did. He could have a fight with Renshaw and, so far as he could see, there would be nothing to pay except possibly another fight later on.

He permitted himself a chuckle over the situation. Damned if there wasn't something to this matter of being a fella's own man. Why, he could eat when he liked, sleep when and where he liked, rise when he liked, go where he liked. He was answerable to no one, to nothing.

Renshaw apparently misunderstood that chuckle. A grin wreathed his ugly, tobacco-stained lips.

"Thass it, Don," he said. "Just a joke. Fella likes his fun now an' then, y' know."

Well, well, this man who was reputed to be outside the high wall of respectability was putting himself on a plane with Don, was he? He had badgered this girl, and he was assuming that Don would look on that as a joke.

Don put heel to horse and wheeled the animal alongside Renshaw's. It was a snappy movement, and the only move Renshaw made to defend himself was to throw up an arm. That was excellent for Don. He merely seized the arm and pulled his horse back and around. Renshaw was dragged from his saddle. Don threw him to the ground. Renshaw landed on his back, and he lay there between the two horses with his face uplifted to Don's. Fury glowed in Renshaw's face briefly. The look died when Don threw a leg over the horn and seemed about to jump down.

If he jumped he would land squarely on the fallen man. Again Renshaw threw up an arm.

"Don't you do it," he yelled. "I ain't done nothin' to you."

"Don't look at me like that, then," Don ordered, resuming his seat. "Get up."

Renshaw scrambled to his feet and backed over to his own horse. He kept his eyes steadily and now fearfully on Don's face.

"Whatcha want?" he mumbled.

"Me?" Don said. "Nothin'." He turned with a kind of mock deference to the girl. "It's for you to say, ma'am," he added.

He expected she would tell him to order Renshaw to ride on. He thought she would want Renshaw to be got out of her sight as quickly as possible. She proved, however, to be an exacting young lady.

"Have him apologize," she said.

"If you got an apology in your system, let's have it, Renshaw," Don said.

"How d'yuh know me?" Renshaw asked. "I ain't never bothered you none."

"Why, you cussed rustler, everybody knows you," Don stated.

It was a loose statement, without real foundation so far as Don knew, but apparently it was not a statement which Renshaw relished.

"Rustler?" Renshaw repeated, his face mottled by various emotions. "You'll find out."

"Prob'ly. Well, I've asked for an apology. I've asked once and that's once too many times."

Renshaw looked at the girl and made a thumb and finger gesture toward his hat.

"I didn't mean to bother yuh none, ma'am," he said. "I was jest foolin'."

The girl sat looking at him stonily. She would not speak to him. Nor would she suggest anything to Don. Haughty, by gosh. She believed in putting up the bars and keeping them up. Don thought he knew what she wanted now.

"Hop your horse and ride, fella," he ordered.

RENSHAW mounted his horse very creditably. Don saw that the man was strong and agile in spite of his being somewhat ungainly. He sent his horse past Don's and as he did so he gave Don a venomous look. Don did not dignify that by comment. Renshaw disappeared

around the hill. The girl turned to Don.

"I'm glad you happened along, Mr. Fraser," she said.

She certainly could gentle herself all of a sudden. A moment ago she had been kinda domineering. Now she was quietly feminine. And there was a vastly different look in her eyes. Don would have been a fool if he had not known that that look held a touch of admiration. It embarrassed him. He was a one-girl man. There would never be a girl in this world for him except Bess Graham.

"You know me?" he asked, merely to say something.

"Why, certainly," she answered. "I was on my way over to your house to see you."

"See me?"

"Why, yes. I'm Jean Lacy."

Oh, gosh, yes. No wonder he had thought there was something familiar about her. Ol' Pete Lacy's daughter, eh? Pete Lacy was the wealthiest ranchman hereabouts. He was a rough old fellow, fiery, contemptuous of anything which had the appearance even of being soft. And so he was just the kind of man to want his daughter to have whatever graces education could give her. He had sent her into the East to school four years ago. She had not been back, so far as Don knew, though she might have come back a dozen times and he not know it. Old Lacy wasn't much of a mixer. He kept pretty much to his own stamping grounds. Don had seen Jean a good many times of course, but he had rarely talked with her. He recalled her now as a rather long-legged, hard-riding harum-scarum. Education had done a lot for her or to her.

However, there was no use in his getting flustered. He wasn't going to let anything or anybody fluster him from now on. What was the use? He had drained a good many things out of his mind, he perceived, and he was not going to let that old mind become cluttered up again. He had a feeling that his mind had become a clear-flowing stream, where before it had been choked now and then against the dam of a kind of confusion.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," he said. "I know who you are."

"You didn't know when you first came up here," she stated.

"Didn't I?" he asked.

She ignored his question. She had made

her statement, and she seemed content to let it ride.

"I am glad for more reasons than one that you came along," she told him. "In the first place you saved me from annoyance, and in the second you proved yourself to be exactly the kind of a man my father thinks you."

The kind of man Old Lacy thought him? Why, he hadn't supposed Lacy had ever given him one serious thought.

"My father wants to see you," she said. "Will you ride back with me?"

"What does he want to see me about?" Don asked cautiously.

"I don't know. There seems to be trouble brewing. Father and I were alone at the house and he didn't want to leave. There has been some night-riding for the last week or so."

"Cows driftin'?" Don asked.

"Um-m. Perhaps that was it. Will you go with me?"

A sense of freedom was one thing. Lack of money was another. Don had known that he would have to have a job from time to time. A man couldn't live on mountain air. Why, yes, he would as soon work for Lacy for a while. Lacy would have to put up his wages, though. He said he would ride with the girl.

"You are free, aren't you?" she asked. "You have left your brother's ranch."

His brother's ranch! Hoom, the news had traveled fast. The girl seemed to see the look of resentment that traveled over his face.

"Well, I shouldn't have said it that way," she apologized. "I was repeating what my father said, I suppose. We had heard that you had been disinherited."

"I don't expect a man is disinherited long as he has two hands and a horse," Don said stiffly.

There was a sudden glow in her eyes. Education hadn't robbed her of impulses which had been hers before she had gone East. She was still of the West, though how much she perhaps did not know.

"If I went home without you and told my father that, I'm afraid he would say things to me," she declared.

"You'd prob'ly have something to say on your own account," he grinned.

"Maybe," she laughed. "Well, let's get along."

They turned their horses and threaded

their way among the hills. They were rounding a hill, as Don had rounded another a while back, when they came face to face with another girl on a horse. She was a smaller girl than Jean. "Tawny" fitted her. Her hair was yellow-brown, and the sun's dull flush was in her cheeks. She had wide gray eyes, eyes usually very steady, very cool, the eyes of a person not easily shaken.

She must have been a little shaken now, however. A cloud came into those lovely eyes—and passed, leaving them colder than Don had ever seen them before. She nodded just perceptibly to Don and inclined her head to Jean.

"Hello, Bess," Jean said.

"Fine day," said Bess Graham, and spurred her horse past Don's so closely that their stirrups almost touched.

Don opened his lips to speak, closed them again. Bess had passed around the hill. Don felt Jean's eyes on his face questioningly. Damn it, he supposed what he was feeling his face disclosed. It must have disclosed a good deal then, for there was a tumult in Don's breast. His freedom was a sickening thing all of a sudden. He did not want it, had no use for it. He wanted Bess, that dependable girl who had been all the world to him. Gone though she was, he could still see her plainly, her strong, compact body sitting easily in the saddle, her lovely eyes, clouded briefly though they had been, her light-brown hair, the sun-flushed cheeks.

"Well, let's be getting along," he grated.

Jean made no comment on the encounter, but as they rode at a lope he could feel her eyes on him from time to time. Speculating about him and Bess, was she? He fell to brooding. Where had Bess been going? She hadn't been over this way in a long time. And how she had looked at him! Well, he reckoned she had no use for him now. He didn't suspect her of being jealous. He did think that his being with Jean had stabbed Bess. He did not put so high a valuation on himself, and besides the meanness of jealousy was not in Bess. He cared so much for her that he was likely to deny natural emotions to her.

They came at last to the Lacy ranch-house and Lacy himself stepped out to meet them.

"We'll put up the horses and then I want to talk to you," Lacy said.

Jean and Don dismounted and the two men turned the horses into a corral. Jean had come along with them. Don faced the older man after the bars had been put up.

LACY was an old-timer, perhaps fifty-five years of age. He was a grizzled old fellow, sun and wind bitten. He had a grim mouth, which a smile seldom touched, and his eyes were a hard blue, their sight undimmed by long years of gazing into distances.

"I hear you're free," Lacy said.

"I'm out of a job temporary," Don agreed.

"Well, I ain't goin' to offer you no sympathy on account of you losin' your ranch," Lacy said. "The ranch should have been yours by rights. You pretty near earned it the last few years. I been watchin' you. Fact is, I been watchin' you for a long time. I've heard talk about you, too. You can handle a gun, can't you?"

"Yes."

"I mean fast. You can place a bullet."

"Yes."

"Not so many can do it nowadays," Lacy said. "Well, I'm lookin' to hire your gun, a coupla them for that matter."

"You can't do it," Don said decidedly. "What do you think I am, a gunman for hire?"

"Hold your bronc down on his four feet," Lacy said testily. "If I wanted somebody killed, I would go out an' do it myself. I still could. Have you lost any calves?"

"Not one that I know about. I've always kept a close check."

"I know," Lacy nodded. "You could do it with a small outfit. Well, I ain't lost none till lately. Other day I come on five carcasses. They had been skinned. Looked like somebody had wanted some hides an' some meat. I don't reckon they stopped at five. I have had men ridin' for some time now, but, damn it, they don't seem to get nowhere. You are a young fella with a head on your shoulders. I got ten men to place at your disposal. Will you head them and find out who has been tamperin' with my cows?"

"You've heard the talk about Renshaw, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I don't listen to no talk. I don't want you to. I want you to start with an open mind. When you get the goods on somebody, I don't want you to be makin'

no mistake about it. Will you take the job?"

"At a hundred a month," said Don coldly. "An' you ain't hirin' my gun. You are hirin' me. I get a free hand."

"Which is talk," said Lacy. "You begin now?"

"I'm here."

"I'll have the cook rustle some grub for you an' then we will ride."

He went into the house. Jean had been standing by while the deal had been made. She now turned to Don.

"I was afraid you might mention our encounter with Renshaw," she said.

"You been away from here for some time," he said.

"Renshaw didn't say anything worse than that," she snapped.

"The truth never hurt nobody," he stated.

"I'll leave you," she said. "You'll have a lot to do to get ready. You'll want to oil your—"

He knew somehow that she had been going to say "your hired gun." He looked into her eyes coldly.

"—your gun," she finished.

"That's better," he told her.

She fled to the house. He thought she was stirred up some. For himself his pulse had not quickened a single beat.

CHAPTER III

INNOCENCE

DON and Lacy came to the edge of the mountains. They had passed through the hills and had crossed a valley. Don suddenly stopped his horse.

"Somebody's comin'," he said.

"Young ears," said Lacy. "I had 'em once."

Half a dozen men, mounted, came into view, issuing in single file from a draw. Don let his head fall, but he regarded the men closely from beneath his hat brim. He saw that four of them were typical men of the country, hardworking, rather sober-faced fellows. He dismissed them from his mind at once. His interest was held by the other two, however. He knew them at once for tramps of the cattle country. They were ill-favored, poorly dressed. Somehow they reminded him of Renshaw.

"Where'd you get them two fellas?" he asked Lacy. "Make it snappy. They're comin' up."

"Hired 'em last spring," Lacy replied. "Goin' to let 'em go next week. Had to have 'em in the rush season. Not much account."

"Keep 'em on," Don directed. "I want to get acquainted with 'em."

"All right."

The men rode up to Lacy and Don, spreading out their horses, so that they were ranged in front of the two men.

"Boys," Lacy said, "I have hired Don Fraser to take charge of this hunt. He is a good man. Whatever orders he gives will be the same as if they come from me. Understand?"

The four punchers nodded. The other men looked at Don. One of them stirred in his saddle and then he stepped his horse forward, so that he was in front of the other men.

"Whatcha want us to do?" he asked.

Don ignored him, turning to Lacy.

"You might as well go back to the house, Mr. Lacy," he said. "We'll get busy. If anything turns up, I'll let you know."

"Why, I'm goin' along with you," Lacy protested. "I am old, but I ain't through complete. Mebbe I can be of some assistance to you."

"I'm runnin' things," Don said. "If I ain't, somebody else is. You can take your choice."

"Oh, well," said Lacy with a shrug of his shoulders, and he turned his horse and rode away toward the house.

Don faced the man who had asked the question.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Caley."

"And yours?" Don asked the other man.

"Stevick."

"You look like you might have had some experience in this kind of business," Don said, with what might have passed for a deferential smile. "Have you found anything?"

As Don had expected, the first spokesman gulped the flattery. His thick lips drew back from his snaggy teeth.

"Why, we found one sign but we lost it again," he answered. "There wasn't nothin' we could pick up in the mountains, but down by a crick a mile or so over here we come on a sign. The crick runs east

an' west. On the banks there was the marks of horses. The horses was drove into the stream and headed east."

"How do you know they was headed east?"

"Riders wasn't careful enough. 'Stead of goin' straight into the water, two of them turned their horses east just as the horses was about to leave the bank. Easy enough to read, wasn't it?"

"You did a good piece of work," Don said. "Did you ride along the creek bank?"

"For a ways but we didn't pick up nothin'. We was comin' back to see Lacy to get further orders."

Don looked away as if he were considering what the men had done. He had an instinctive distrust of these two men. They didn't look good to him. Yet he did not want them to feel that. He had seen the man take flattery once. He would discover how strong his appetite for it was. He beckoned him to one side.

"You look an' act like you had some brains," Don said. "You know what Lacy is lookin' for, don't you?"

"He has been missin' some young stock, so he said."

"Yeah, an' I think it's the bunk," said Don. "Who's goin' to take a chance in runnin' off a bunch of calves? What would there be in it, considerin' the risk? I tell you, fella: I got somethin' to do besides runnin' wild through these mountains. I got a certain person I want to see. S'pose you ride around with the men till nightfall an' then I will come back. You can tell me if you have stumbled on anything."

"Shore," Caley agreed heartily. "I think it is wild goose stuff my own self. Where'll we meet you?"

"You got food out here?"

"Yeah. Up the draw. S'pose you come there?"

"Good enough."

Don wheeled his horse, waved his hand to the other men, and rode away. Glancing back, he saw the men file into the draw, Caley at the head of them. Don drew his horse down to a walk. It had not taken him long to get Caley's number. Caley was at least disloyal to Lacy. He had been assigned to a certain duty. All he had done had been to ride around till he came upon a sign at the creek bank. He had perfunctorily ridden up the creek for a way

and then he had started back to report his "find" to Lacy. If Caley was just a tramp, that was about what he would be expected to do. And yet Don continued to think of Renshaw in connection with this man. There might of course be nothing in that. The comparison might have come to him merely because the two men were alike in their general looks. On the other hand it might be something well worth looking into. In any event Don had led Caley to believe that he was easily satisfied, and that he took no stock in Lacy's suspicion that Lacy was being robbed. He thought it was not so bad a first step.

When he came in sight of Lacy's house, he rode through the hills in the direction of his own house. He could not ride in the other direction without being seen by Lacy if Lacy were outside. His intention was to cross the road and pass through the hills on that side. He would thus come out in the road three miles from Lacy's house, for a mile beyond Lacy's house the road turned abruptly and wound north.

HE WAS crossing the road when unexpectedly a rider came out of the hills at about the spot where Don had encountered the girl and Renshaw. He was surprised to find that the rider was Jean Lacy. At sight of him she stopped her horse. Don supposed that, still nettled, she did not want to speak to him, and he did not stop his own horse. However, she called to him sharply, and he turned and rode up to her.

"I've been over to your place," she said.

"You knew I wasn't there," he told her.

"I could go there without looking for you, couldn't I? I wanted to see your brother."

"You know my brother?"

"Why, yes. I have met him in town several times since I came back. I don't think that will do him any harm, will it?"

"Why, no, ma'am," said Don gravely. "Looka here, Miss Lacy. I didn't mean to offend you. I didn't mean to snap you up."

Jean smiled suddenly.

"I'll tell you how that is," she said. "Since I came back, people have been looking at me as if I were a stranger. They seem to think that because I have been away to school that I am no longer one of them. I thought you were trying to high hat me."

"Why, Miss Lacy, I think you are a good game girl," he said. "I didn't have no feelin' that you was a stranger to this country."

"I'll tell you something, then," she went on. "Renshaw was at your brother's place when I went over there."

"How did that fella treat you this time?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, he didn't pay any attention to me. When I rode in there, he and your brother were sitting on the back steps. Renshaw was talking. What he said seemed to disturb your brother. I thought you might want to look into that."

"I got another matter to look into now," Don said. "I'll drop over there some time maybe and see Robert."

"Your feeling against your brother is pretty strong, is it?" she asked.

"Ma'am, it ain't! Course I don't like the idea of givin' up a place that has always been home to me. But that ain't my brother's fault. I on'y wish him luck."

He made his statement soberly. His face was grave. There was the light of honesty in his eyes.

"I see," she nodded. "Well, I just thought I would tell you."

"My brother has been coddled some," Don said. "The ranch is now his. It will be better if he learns to stand on his own feet. He has got to learn that lesson some time."

"I suppose so," the girl said absently. "Well, I must be getting home. See you later."

She rode on and Don made his way into the hills. He did not think Renshaw's visit to his brother was of any importance. Renshaw had been headed that way, and he had doubtless ridden in to get acquainted with Robert. What Renshaw did in the open was of no consequence. He might be hooked up with the calf theft and he might not be. In any event his under-cover work was what Don had to concern himself with.

As he rode on to Graham's place, his thoughts turned to Bess. Gosh, she had been frigid this morning. Well, she needn't have been. Heaven knew, he was not going to press himself and his poverty on her. Even if she had favored him, he would have had to run away with her before he could marry her. Old Graham would not consent to her marriage to

man who had hardly a dollar in the world.

When he came in sight of the Graham house he saw no one. He rode into the yard and dismounted and knocked on the kitchen door. Bess opened it. He judged that she had opened it absently, for she looked down at him with vacant eyes for a moment.

"Oh," she said at last, coldly.

"I was just lookin' for your father," Don explained uncomfortably.

"You'll find him at the far end of the alfalfa fields, fixing the fences," Bess said, and she closed the door.

Whew! Don felt exactly as he would have felt if she had slapped his face. She certainly was through with him. Resentment flooded up through him, and that bred a fierce, fighting mood in him. Damn it, Lacy had hired him to go up against a bunch of criminals. He would go up against them properly prepared. He stopped his horse, untied his saddle roll, and got out his belt and gun. He buckled the belt about his waist, pushed the gun down in the holster, and rode on.

HE CAME presently to the line of fence of which Bess had spoken and rode along that. Soon he saw three men working on the fence. Bit o' luck! The two men with Graham were the men he was looking for. He rode up to them and stopped his horse.

Graham came erect from a stooping position. When he saw who his visitor was, his face darkened. Then his eyes went to the gun.

"What in hell are you comin' on my place armed for?" he demanded.

"I'm workin' for Lacy," Don answered.

"You damned simpleton, take that gun off."

Don stared. He was sure that the sight of the gun had not roused this ire in Graham. There must be something more. Men wore guns now and then. There was nothing in the sight of a weapon to stir up Graham in this fashion.

"Why, no," Don said gravely. "I'm keepin' the gun right where she is."

"Get off my land, then—and stay off."

"I sure will an' it'll be a pleasure. I want to talk to McEwen an' Joslyn though."

"You can't," Graham snapped. "They're busy. They are workin' an' that is a hell

of a sight more'n you are doin'. You've turned rambler, haven't you?"

"I've just told you I'm workin' for Lacy," Don answered, holding in his own rising anger. "Mac," he went on to McEwen, "I need you an' Jostlin'. I want you to jostle along with me."

"You in a jam?" Mac asked.

"Looks like it."

"I'll ride with you at dark," Mac said.

"Me, too," Joslyn added.

Don had been quite sure of that. These two boys had worked for him one spring. When he could no longer afford to keep them, they had gone to work for Graham. They had met a number of times since then. A strong friendship had sprung up between them. They were of an age. The two boys had traveled a good deal east and south. Mac knew the country thoroughly over a wide area. Both of them were bright-eyed, hard-mouthed youths. They were efficient men when they worked, but the lure of the road got them frequently. Often they and Don had sat under the starry skies while those two had spun their yarns. Don's thoughts had immediately gone to them when he had seen, after his talk with Caley, that he would need a couple of men whom he could depend upon.

And after Don had finished whatever there was to do for Lacy perhaps the three would hit the road. Mac and Joslyn would know places to go to. They would have quite a time. Mac had said that they were getting rather tired of their jobs. Graham was a good deal of a slave driver, in their opinion.

After Joslyn's "me, too" Graham stood staring from one man to the other for a moment. Then he swore vigorously.

"I'm glad you lost your ranch, Fraser," he declared. "I can see now that the reputation you had built up for yourself as a hard-workin', steady man was all froth. You been achin' to take the bit in your teeth for a long time. Now you are runnin' free, ain't you? Well, you can get to hell out of here and stay out. As for you two—" he turned on the punchers—"you can ride with him right this minute. You come on up to the house an' I will pay you off an' make sure you don't carry away with you anything that don't belong to you."

Their horses were grazing near by, and

they mounted them. Graham took the lead and they followed him. The two punchers went into the bunkhouse and came out with saddle rolls. Their belongings were few. They rode light. Graham emerged from the house and handed them the money they had coming.

"Git!" he ordered.

The three men turned their horses.

"And you, gunman, don't come back here no more," Graham told Don. "Further'n that, don't ever speak to my daughter again."

Don thought he understood that. Graham knew he was poor now. When Graham had thought he would one day own the ranch, he had not frowned on the relationship of Bess and Don. His dismissal of Don must have Bess's sanction, too. He was astonished at Bess. He hadn't thought she was that kind of girl.

Oh, well, he told himself, as he urged his horse out to the road, it didn't make any difference. Nothing made any difference. Fortune had played him a shabby trick or two, but he supposed fortune had a habit of doing that. No man should know if there was an ache in his heart.

THE three scampered along for a mile. Don saw that the two punchers were in high spirits. They had been relieved of another job. Soberer men would have mourned, but not these two. Theirs was now the holiday spirit. Don had known they would ask no questions. They would wait for him to impart any information he wished to impart. If the information was meager, it would make no difference. If there was to be a fight, they would stay with it to the finish.

Several hours remained between now and dark, and Don thought he might use that time to ride over and see his step-brother. Renshaw's tongue might have loosened while he was talking to Robert. To him Robert would be a guileless youth. He might seek to impress the boy by tall tales. Robert would accept these as merely tales, but Don thought he might be able to winnow a grain or two of information out of the chaff.

The sun was dipping toward the west as they rode in toward the old house. They passed the side of it, and then Don suddenly stopped his horse. A man was sitting on the kitchen steps. He was not

such a man as would ordinarily bring Don to a shocked halt. He wore no hat and his head was very bald. It was a brown, bony old head, and the face beneath it was thin with hollows in temples and cheeks. The eyes were beady, and they fixed themselves on Don's face for a moment and then went to Don's hanging gun. He was, Don saw, a man who was acquainted with guns and interested in the wearer of one.

He sat very still, but there was nothing out of the ordinary in his attitude. What had caught and held Don's attention was his proprietary air. He sat there on the steps as if he owned this place. There was something strange in that, and Don passed his hand over his eyes as if he could not believe the message they sent to his brain.

"Where's my brother?" he asked quietly, endeavoring to keep any note of apprehension from his voice.

"So you're Don Fraser, are you?" the man asked.

"I'm Don Fraser."

The beady eyes traveled over Don's body, over his horse, traveled from that animal to the other horses, traveled over the bodies of their riders. Slowly they came back to Don. Don had an immediate feeling that this man was not so old as he appeared. The marks on him were not the marks of passing time, but those of a hard-lived life.

"Where's your brother?" the man repeated. "Why, he has went to town."

"When will he be back?"

"Not a-tall, fur as I know."

There must be some sort of joke in this, Don thought. The man had narrowed his eyes, and his lips were pursed. He looked as if he might smile in wintry fashion.

Don dismounted and walked up to him. The man kept his eyes on Don's face, raising the eyes as Don drew nearer to him.

"What's the joke?" Don demanded. "Why isn't my brother comin' back to his ranch?"

"His ranch?" the man asked. "Hell, he ain't go no ranch. He has sold out. I have bought this yere outfit, lock, stock 'n' bar'l. Your brother ain't comin' back because he is afraid of you, afraid you will be sore about his selling out and raise hell."

CHAPTER IV

TIME'S FORELOCK

DON and his two friends were approaching the spot at which Don was to meet Lacy's men. They had not ridden straight toward the place. Suspicion of those two disreputable drifters had grown in Don's mind. Disclosures which that odd old man who had bought the ranch had made had added still further to the suspicion. So Don had led the two men through the hills by another way. The meeting-place was only a quarter of a mile beyond, but the three men could creep up on it unobserved.

Don found that he had made no mistake in his choice of aides. Leaving the ranch house, he had told the men jokingly that he would pay them thirty-three dollars, thirty-three and a third cents a month, explaining that that would be their share of the hundred a month he was to get from Lacy. Mac had laughed.

"You needn't be p'tickler about the thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents," he said. "Looks to us like you were in a jam. We will stand by you till you get the jam busted."

It looked to Don, too, as if he were in a jam. He had had several moments of amazement, of course, when the old man had said he now owned the ranch. Several ideas had raced through his mind: Robert, knowing himself inadequate to manage the ranch, had planned all along to sell it. He had been afraid to tell Don. Don was no sooner out of sight than Renshaw had ridden in from one direction and his father from another, and the deal had been completed. For that old man had proved that he was Renshaw's father. He displayed a deed made out to himself and signed by Robert. He was not afraid to disclose that he and his son had known that the ranch had been left to Robert. They had had the title investigated, and they had that morning given Robert a check to cover the purchase price. The price was sixty thousand dollars, too little, as Don knew, but probably enough to satisfy Robert.

The transaction certainly had a legal aspect. Not only had Don lost the ranch which his father had once owned, but it had now passed into alien hands. He had demanded to know where the younger Renshaw was.

"I dunno where he is," Renshaw had said. "He will be here in doo time, h'ever. He is goin' to run the place. He has got some cattle of his own. I expect he will drive them over here."

"Where did he get cattle?" Don asked.

"Where did he get 'em? Why, where does a man get cattle? Raises 'em or buys 'em."

"I expect he will have a lot of young stock," Don hinted.

"Whatever stock he has will bear his brand," Renshaw declared.

"I don't doubt it," Don agreed. "Well, you tell your precious son that I will be over here to see him."

He and Mac and Joslyn had then left. Don felt that he could no longer discuss the sale with this withered old baldhead. He might lose his temper, and this, he saw, was a time when he must keep his head. He had therefore gone so far as to make a joke with the two boys about their pay. Those two were rough-and-ready chaps, a fight or a frolic being in their line, but they had discernment. They made no talk on their way into the hills. They seemed to see that Don should be left in peace to digest what he had learned. He had got a full meal certainly.

Don presently called a halt. They dismounted and let their reins drag. Don felt that he had got his mind in order so far as was possible with the information he had.

"Here's how she stacks up, boys," he said. "I figger that them two fellas that is workin' for Lacy is workin' for Renshaw, too. Mebbe that ol' timer back there is the brains of the party. That's generally the way, you know. Some guy with a little more brains than the others is the main squeeze in these crooked outfits. That ol' fella made me think of a spider. Mebbe he has been spinnin' a web all along."

"Looks to me like the younger Renshaw has been drivin' off young stock all the time he has been here. He could hold 'em together up in the mountains. This here game that them Renshaws are playin' has been played before. They ain't the on'y ones that has started in life with a runnin' iron as their capital. They make a deal to buy a ranch that has been owned by decent people. They move onto it. They become decent themselves. They don't do

a thing that anybody can take exception to. Meek an' mild will be their motto. Well, what you goin' to do about that?"

"Why, you gotta hit 'em below the belt before they get themselves all set on that ranch," Joslyn offered.

"Jostlin', your brains ain't all in your feet," Don said. 'N' to hit 'em now is what I plan. It ain't you fellas' funeral, but it may be if you stick around."

"We will be interested to know whose funeral it will be," Mac declared.

And that was all of that. Don had given them a chance to withdraw if they liked, but they didn't like.

"All right," Don said. "Now we got to be cautious. Course it might be more fun not to be cautious, but it looks like there is too much at stake. You fellas folla me on foot. I will hop my horse and ride in there where them fellas is waitin'. You be ready for whatever happens."

He hopped his horse and rode out of the hills till he came to a narrow valley. He went to the middle of this and rode along it slowly, so that the two other men, afoot, hugging the line of hills, could keep up with him.

Slowly, too, he rode into the draw. He saw at once that only five men were there. Caley was missing. Don knew that he must take his time about revealing that he had noticed Caley's absence. He must not let the remaining rambler know that he had especially singled out Caley or himself.

He dismounted and walked up to the punchers.

"Find anything, boys?" he asked generally.

One of the punchers looked at him soberly. He was not stupid but he was not especially bright. Don saw that he had been questioningly turning something over in his mind.

"We didn't find nothin'," he said. "How would you expect to find anything when you didn't look for it? We been loafin' ever since you went away."

The man who had called himself Stevick stepped forward.

"This boy don't know what we been doin'," he said. "Caley has been on a hunt. He will be showin' up here pretty soon, and I'm thinkin' he will have some noos."

"Where did Caley go?" Don asked.

"He didn't say. Caley is a kind of a lone-hander sometimes."

"Lone wolf, mebbe," Don suggested.

"Why, mebbe he is a wolf at that," the man retorted, and he looked Don steadily in the eyes.

Don knew that something had happened to freshen this fellow's courage. He was surer of himself than he had been that morning. Also he seemed to be careful. Still facing Don, he retreated from him till he came to the wall of a hill. Then he sat down with his back to the wall. This might, Don knew, be mere caution, but on the other hand it might be part of a plan. However, the man was not visibly wearing a gun, and Don let him sit there.

"You want something to eat?" the puncher who had criticised the hunt asked.

"Not now," Don answered. "We will wait for Caley."

HE HAD not long to wait. Caley came, but he did not come as Don had expected he would. A hold-up had been farthest from Don's mind. He had had a notion that Caley would return and try to lead him into a trap.

He was apprised of Caley's arrival by the sound of his rusty voice from above. Don looked up. Caley's bare head was thrust out over the rim of the hill. A rifle was pointed slantingly down at Don.

"Tighten yorself an' reach," Caley ordered.

Don could only obey. He was not non-plussed by Caley's action. Caley had plotted but so had he. Mac and Joslyn were somewhere near by. If they were not within hearing and striking distance already they soon would be. When they arrived they would arrive noiselessly. Don gave thanks that he had taken time by the forelock. Anticipation of trouble was the way to meet trouble. He would keep a good hold of time's ol' forelock, so he would.

However, he must not let Caley think he was complacent. Caley would want to gloat a little. He would expect Don to be angry. Don began to swear lightly, and he scowled up at Caley.

"Well, what did yuh think?" Caley jeered. "Did you think you could boss me an' Stevick? Reckon not! We chooses our own bosses. You ain't one of 'em."

Boy, I got my finger on the trigger, an' she is balanced on a hair. Shall I pull her?"

Don could feel a tingle up his spine; his hair seemed to stir. That uncouth fellow up there might shoot him at that. It would all depend on what the younger Renshaw's mood was. He had insulted Renshaw, had, in fact, abused him in the presence of Jean. Renshaw undoubtedly was not above killing a man or having a man killed. What Don had said to him had probably got under his skin.

Well, Don had recently been disinherited. He had lost his girl. He had been run off by Graham. He had hired out as a gunman of a sort. Oh, a lot of things had happened to him. If he had to take an assassin's bullet now, he would have to take it. The best he could do would be to take it standin' up.

"You dirty pup," he said, "pull her if that is the way you feel about it."

Caley's eyes flamed. He shifted the elbow which served as a rest. His hot eyes then went along the barrel. But he did not pull the trigger.

"Damn yuh," he said, "if I was runnin' the show, you would have called a good man a pup for the last time. But you wait. I won't shoot yuh when yuhr time comes. I will carve yuhr black heart out."

"Big talk," Don sneered.

Caley apparently had difficulty in controlling himself. Passion twisted his ugly face and the flame in his eyes reddened them. He sucked in a great breath through parted lips. As if he could not trust himself, he turned the rifle away from Don and pointed it in the general direction of the four punchers.

"You fellas line up there against the wall," he ordered. "Take 'em, Stevick."

With a nasty grin splitting his lips, Stevick rose and drew a gun from its hiding place beneath the waistband above his hip. He held the gun loosely in the puncher's direction.

"Keep yuhr eye on that fella Fraser, too," Caley instructed. "I'm comin' down there."

He withdrew his rifle and put it on the ground before him lengthwise. Then he pushed himself to his feet, carrying the rifle with him. One hand grasped the barrel; the other the stock. He paused for a moment, looking down. Don knew

that this was the ideal moment in which Mac and Joslyn could hold him up, but there was no sharp command to Caley to that effect.

The man disappeared from the hilltop and in a moment reappeared, coming around the base of the hill. He walked directly up to Don and took his gun.

"Yuhr a hell of a leader, ain't yuh?" he demanded. "Yuh walked right into it."

"Mebbe I'll walk right out again," Don said coldly.

"Fella," Caley said, "yuhr life ain't worth the snap of my fingers. I'm tellin' yuh that straight. Only thing that gets me is that I won't have the pleasure of killin' yuh."

"Renshaw will do that, will he?" Don asked.

"Why, that ain't no secret now," Caley retorted. "Think I'm afraid to tell yuh? Yes, Renshaw will kill yuh. He will tea. yuh apart."

"How about these four other boys?" Don asked. "Can't they ride?"

"Yuh fool," Caley snarled. "Course not! What we do with them will depend on how they act. They don't look to me like they would stand the gaff much."

Don was anxiously waiting for Mac and Joslyn to make a move. He was sure they would not long delay. They had had time enough to creep up on this scene. However, they would have had to be cautious and perhaps they would need a little more time. Standing as he was, his rifle butt resting on the ground, Caley was a fair target if by chance the two punchers climbed the hill which Caley had just left. Don would try to keep Caley standing there a while longer.

"You don't seem to have no secrets, Caley," he said. "Mebbe you don't think I know everything that is goin' on. Mebbe you don't think I have seen ol' man Renshaw."

"I expect yuh have if yuh have visited that ranch that was yours a while ago," Caley retorted icily.

"Your outfit has somehow defrauded my brother out of that ranch," Don stated.

"Ol' man Renshaw has bought that outfit. He can prove it in seven courts of law."

"He prob'ly bought it with a gun in his hand," Don took a chance shot.

That startled Caley. His jaw dropped

a little and a look of suspicion came into his eyes.

"Yuh guess a hell of a lot, don't yuh?" he asked.

"I'm not guessin'," Don declared. "Why, fella, mebbe ol' Renshaw is already in jail."

Don saw that he had overshot the mark. Caley's jaw immediately tightened and then a grin loosened his lips.

"Who would have him arrested?" he asked.

"Why, if he held my brother up and took his ranch away from him, my brother would go to the sheriff or the prosecutor."

"Haw, haw," Caley exploded.

His merriment was so strong that he threw back his head. This sent the hand which was holding the gun barrel away from him, so that the barrel leaned to Don and the hand was not more than a foot from him. It occurred to him flashingly that he might seize that barrel and wrench the rifle from Caley's hand. He stole a quick glance at Stevick, however, and found that Stevick, grinning delightedly, too, was watching him. Before he could get the rifle into action Stevick would pop a bullet into him. Stevick doubtless would enjoy doing that.

SO DON waited for Caley to recover from his mirth. Caley took perhaps two seconds too long. His laughter ceased and he was about to straighten up. But he did not straighten up. There was an explosion from the top of the hill which Caley had just left. Don saw two fingers of Caley's clutching hand torn away. The rifle barrel was knocked from his grasp and fell to the ground. With a howl Caley seized the wrist of the maimed hand and bent to clasp it tight. He had much ado to keep his feet. He swayed and then lurched like a drunken man.

There was at once another explosion and a bullet tore through Stevick's hat. Stevick had been standing with his gun-hand dropped. He seemed paralyzed with fear, so that he was unable to raise the hand even if he had had the courage to do so. His head on its short neck was jerked forward, as the head of a turtle comes out of the shell. His eyes were wide and his lips hung apart.

"Drop your gun, fella," came Mac's

voice harshly. "Next bullet will plow clean through your gizzard."

So promptly did Stevick drop his gun that the puncher on the hill top might have pulled a string connected with it instead of giving an order. Mechanically, as if another string had been pulled, Stevick raised his hands. One of the punchers went over and picked up his gun. Mac and Joslyn rose on the hilltop.

"We're Lacy's men," the puncher said.

"Yeah, I can pick you," Mac said coolly. He looked down at Don and grinned. "Too bad to waste a bullet on that fella's hand, boss," he said, "but I didn't know just what you wanted. I got another bullet here, though, an' she is the kind of bullet that will go wherever you tell her. Like me to finish that little job?"

Don appeared to debate that. He knew that Mac would not kill Caley if he were told to do so, but he saw the wisdom of joining Mac in making these two tramps think so.

"Not yet, Mac," Don said. "We will let this fella bleed a little. He has got too much blood. Come on down."

In a moment Mac and Joslyn came around the base of the hill. They walked up to Caley.

"Fella," Mac said, "me an' you are a good deal alike. We pick our bosses. You picked yours an' we picked ours. We picked Fraser. You think he ain't much of a boss. That shows how stoopid you are."

Caley lifted a white, pain-filled face. His eyes were sick. He would not hesitate to maim or to kill another man, but the infliction of pain on himself was another matter.

"Ain't yuh gonna gimme some help with them fingers?" he pleaded. "Or are yuh goin' to lemme bleed to death? Them fingers is gone. My right hand, too. Oh, Gawd, I am busted complete."

"I'll say you are busted complete," Mac told him. "That's what you get for pickin' the wrong boss. As a picker you are the bunk."

Caley turned to Don now. All the fire had gone out of him.

"Fraser, help me," he humbly entreated.

"You'll have somethin' to tell us, will you?" Don asked.

"Don't ask me that. Ask me anything but that. I can't squeal. It'd be as much

as my life was worth. Yuh don't know ol' man Renshaw. He is a devil. He has got ten more men behind him, men that won't stop at nothin'. They are hard as nails, men that never laugh. Me, I can laugh. I did a while ago. Fraser, don't ask me nothin'. I can't tell you nothin'. I'm afraid."

He was afraid. He was terror-stricken. And he was suffering physical pain.

"If yuh don't help me, I reckon I can lay down an' die," Caley said with finality in his tone. "It'd be an easier death than I would get otherwise. Fraser, you got to gimme some help with this hand an' then yuh got to get me outa here. Turn me over to the sheriff. I'll be safe from that outfit with him. That's all I can say. You help me or I die. By God, let it ride that way. Help me or don't help me, but I tell you nothin'."

Don saw that the man was far more afraid of that gang than he was of death if his injury should result in his death here. He must know that this was the easiest death that could come to him if Don gave him no aid.

But Don could not let him bleed to death or get an infection. He saw that he would have to get him to town. He did not deserve mercy, but mercy was not dispensed, Don knew, according to any code.

He took out a handkerchief and bound it around Caley's hand, knotting it about the wrist so that the flow of blood was checked.

"Where's your horse?" Don asked.

"Up the draw a ways."

Don nodded to the puncher who had taken Stevick's gun.

"Get his horse," he said.

The puncher returned with the horse.

"You and one of the other boys take him to town," Don directed. "Get him to the county jail and have a doctor called for him. Caley, you met with an accident. I don't want the sheriff droppin' down on us just yet."

"They said you was an easy mark," Caley lamented. "I kin see you are a lone wolf your own self. Well, no! You got sense enough to pick a few helpers. But you ain't no easy mark. I won't say nothin' to the sheriff or nobody else."

The punchers helped him to his horse and the trio rode away. The sun had set

now and darkness was coming rapidly in the draw.

"Come over here, Stevick," Dan ordered. "You are a candidate for a doctor's care, too."

Stevick advanced toward him slowly through the gloom. Don stood peering at him for a moment. Mac and Joslyn and the two other punchers gathered round.

"Stevick—" Don began.

He stopped on the one word. There was the sound of horses rapidly approaching the head of the draw.

"Mebbe it's Renshaw," Don said, and to the two punchers: "Watch Stevick." To Mac and Joslyn: "Come on, boys. Less be ready for 'em. A surprise party might not go so bad."

They ran to the head of the draw and waited there. Out in the valley the darkness was not so thick as it had been in the draw. They could make out two horses bearing down on them.

CHAPTER V

ALLOOF BESS

"FOR Pete's sake!" Don exclaimed as the riders drew nearer, and he added: "Stay here, boys."

"It's ol' Lacy's girl an' another," Mac said.

Don rode out to them. As he did so, he saw Bess Graham stop her horse and hold him back. Jean came on till her horse was alongside Don's. He saw excitement in her eyes. She leaned over to him.

Don's eyes went briefly to Bess. She was not looking at him. She was staring straight ahead, between her horse's ears. She made Don feel as if she were frozen in her saddle. Don did not like that. She was not the Bess he had always known. When Jean started to speak, he stayed her with uplifted hand.

"I reckon somethin' has happened, Bess," he said. "Can't you come up here and let all three of us get in on it together?"

Bess woke up a little. She lifted her head and turned her face toward him. The ice of her frozen state was still with her, however.

"Jean can tell you all there is to tell," she stated. "It is something Jean is interested in. She merely got me so she would have company."

"Uh huh," said Don. "Well, what is it, Jean?"

"Do you know where Robert is?" Jean asked.

"Gone to town, I reckon," Don answered. "He has sold his ranch."

"Sold his ranch?" the girl repeated. "Why, that's impossible."

"Then he has done an impossible thing."

"I knew there was something wrong," Jean declared. "I'll tell you: I rode over to see your brother again this afternoon. A queer old man was sitting outside. I asked him where Robert was and he merely jerked his thumb toward the door. In a few minutes while I waited, wondering, Robert and that man Renshaw came out. Their horses were ready. Robert only nodded to me and they mounted and started to ride away. I asked Robert where he was going. He said he was just going for a ride. There was something strange about him. He kept glancing at Renshaw as if he were afraid he would say something that Renshaw wouldn't like. I don't think he went to town."

"Why," Don said, "he wasn't at home when I was there earlier in the afternoon. He couldn't have been to town and have got back by the time you arrived there."

"Did you go into the house?"

"No."

"If you had I think you would have found Robert and Renshaw sitting there, waiting for you to leave. You must have left just before I came."

"That's the funniest thing ever I heard of," Don said. "Where do you s'pose they've gone?"

"Those men didn't buy Robert's ranch," Jean asserted. "If they did, Robert must have changed his mind. I talked to him yesterday and he was full of his plans for the ranch. For one thing he said he was going to show you he was not the mollycoddle you thought him."

"I never said he was a mollycoddle," Don said.

"He thought you felt that way about him. Well, the important thing is that there appears to have been a sale of the ranch to Renshaw. Renshaw is suspected of being a criminal. I think he has got some kind of a hold on Robert."

Don thought so, too. His thoughts went to Stevick and Caley. He believed he understood now why Caley had held him

up. Caley had doubtless been going to take him to wherever Renshaw was. That seemed a more open move than Renshaw would have made on his own account. He was doubtless acting under instructions from his hard-boiled old dad.

"I'll see what I can do, Miss Lacy," he said. He turned to Mac. "Call one of them boys to ride home with the girls," he said.

Bess was turning her horse. She flashed a look at him over her shoulder.

"You needn't trouble," she said. "We came alone. We can go back alone."

"There is trouble brewin' here," Don said. "You might meet somebody."

"You will need your men," Jean put in. "If you call one of those boys I will tell him to stay here. He will take orders from me."

She wheeled her horse, and she and Bess put spurs to the animals and dashed away. Don stood looking after Bess's retreating figure rather glumly. Gosh, she had a perfect right to throw him over, but it seemed to him hardly necessary that she treat him as she had done. Well, he had no time to waste in useless debate with himself. There was plenty to do.

He turned and strode back into the draw, Mac and Joslyn at his heels. He felt resentful, but he couldn't pour out his resentment against Bess, even in his thoughts. He could pour it out against this man Stevick, however. Stevick's partner, Caley, had held Don up. He had had an itch to kill Don. Stevick had produced a hidden gun. He would doubtless have used that gun if the occasion had risen. Don was therefore in a savage mood as he faced the man.

Under his stare Stevick stood on one foot and then on the other. He was rather pale about the gills, Don thought. He was already scared. The thing to do was to scare him further.

Don whipped out his gun and thrust it into Stevick's stomach. The man retreated a step with a grunt of fear and Don followed him. Mac came along, his gun in his own hand. He urged Don to blow Stevick apart. Stevick murmured something about murderin' him.

"You was all set to murder us," Don retorted.

"Well, gimme a chance," Stevick whined. "What is it you want to know?"

"You get the idea, don't you?" Don sneered. "Where's Renshaw?"

"I dunno," Stevick answered. "I ain't seen him for sev'ral days."

"He has got an outfit," Don said. "Where is it? Where has it been hangin' out?"

"Gawd, if I tell you ol' Renshaw will kill me," Stevick whined.

Ol' Renshaw, eh? That baldheaded old spider. He seemed to be the main kick in this thing. Even this hardened criminal was afraid of him.

"You fellas seem to think ol' Renshaw is a mighty man," Don said. "Tell me about him."

THE story, as Stevick haltingly told it, was simple enough. Renshaw was an old-timer of an older West. He traveled, Stevick said. He had always had an outfit with him, men who would hesitate at nothing. He had been hiding out in these mountains for quite a long time now, after a serious escapade further south. He had picked up Caley and Stevick on his way in here. He never appeared in the open. He left that to his son. He would do anything. Yes, he had been stealing young stock since he had been here. He had a coupla hundred head hidden in the mountains. He had said only recently that he would have a place for them pretty soon, and then they would all turn respectable for a while. No, Stevick didn't know anything about the purchase of a ranch. Ol' Renshaw didn't take any one into his confidence. He only told them what to do. What sort of man was the younger Renshaw? Not strong on nerve. He would kill a man, though, if the odds were in his favor. Stevick had seen him kill one man whom the father suspected. It had been at night. There had been a single shot, and a bullet had gone into the man's back. The gang had ridden on, leaving the man where he fell.

"Well, where's this hang-out?" Don demanded.

"It's over on the other side of the mountains," Stevick answered. "I can tell you how to get there. You don't need to take me along. You know these mountains, don't you?"

"I tell you, Don," Mac put in. "Less leave this fella here under guard of one of these boys. One of them is shy a gun.

This fella has no gun. One of the boys can tie him into knots if he tries to get away."

"Good idea," Don said. "Tell us how to get there, Stevick. Tell us straight, too. If you don't we will come back here."

Stevick told them just where to ride. Don knew that he was telling the truth, for Stevick could describe the country through which he said they would have to pass. Their journey, Don saw, would take them till close to midnight. It would carry them through the highest mountains nearly to the further slope. Down that slope, Don knew, there was a tumble of hills, beyond those a long, humped ridge and then the flats. As the hangout Stevick described a bowl out of which a broad box cañon ran. This would, Don knew, provide just the kind of place an outfit like Renshaw's would be looking for. It was far from any habitation and no cattle were run in there. The way to it was over barren mountains and through draws as barren. However, right at the spot there was ample water and some grass for cattle.

"Renshaw must know this country," Don said. "He must have been here before."

"No; he is always lookin' for a safe place. We just stumbled on that place."

"We'll get our horses and ride, boys," Don said, after he had placed Stevick under guard of the puncher who had no gun. "How come you boys had no guns when you were supposed to be on a man-hunt?" he asked as an afterthought.

"We had guns when we started out," the man answered. "Caley an' this fella said they had none. We lent ours to them. They seemed to take charge."

"Did Caley have a rifle then?" Don asked.

"He didn't. I dunno where he got it."

"He must have had it hid here," Don said. "He wouldn't have had time to go back to camp to get it. I reckon them fellas have been doin' some plannin'."

"That's what we got jobs from Lacy for," Stevick volunteered. "We was to watch and to head any hunt that started from Lacy's."

"Has ol' Renshaw got men any place else?" Don asked anxiously. "At Graham's, for instance."

"No; he was goin' to have men scattered all through here, but somehow things seemed to come to a head all of a sudden."

As Don and the three men started on their long ride, Don thought he had the situation pretty clearly defined in his mind. His being disinherited had brought matters to a climax with old Renshaw. Young Renshaw had probably picked up gossip about Don's and Robert's affairs in the village. He had carried that gossip to his father. The father had seen that a youngster would be left in charge of a ranch. He had descended on that ranch. How he had persuaded Robert to sell, Don did not know. Doubtless threats had been used. Robert had ridden away with the younger Renshaw. Don did not believe that Renshaw would let him go to town. Old Renshaw had a deed to the ranch. That deed doubtless would be legal if Robert disappeared. Young Renshaw had shot one man in the back. He probably would not hesitate to shoot Robert.

With this clearing up of events, Don felt a new clarity of mind. He saw that perhaps he had not been entirely just to his half brother. Don's father had married Robert's mother. It was his duty to provide for her. Thus he had a right to leave the ranch to her. In her turn she had a right to leave it to Robert. Don reckoned he should have remained on the ranch and have helped Robert. Still he had worked a number of years for almost nothing. He had a life of his own to lead. Well, he was on his way to help Robert now. That was the main thing. He was about to face a desperate situation, but he did not shrink from that. That was the result of his being so free, he supposed. He was free of responsibility except the responsibility which lay before him. He was free of Bess. Gosh, she had been scornful back there.

"If you'll come out of your trance for a minute, you can tell us which way to turn here," Mac broke in on his thoughts.

Don's head came up with a jerk. He smiled sheepishly. He saw that they had ridden several miles while he had mused. Before him the mountains lifted themselves. They were on a crest which shouldered out over a cañon. They could go down diagonally on their left or they could turn to their right and pass through timber.

"To your left," Don said.

They dropped down, skirting the cañon, and came to a rocky floor. A ridge of shale jutted out from the mountain and

they passed over this and came into a valley in which there was no growing thing. They followed this for three miles and came to a pass. This led them up to a plateau, and the plateau dropped down into another hard valley. This they followed for a long time while the night wheeled on its way.

At last they began to climb a long slope and presently they stood at the crest of the mountains. Below them was a pit of darkness, but Don knew that it had a floor. Beyond them were lower peaks. They had but to descend to that floor, cross to the peaks, and come to a draw. Beyond that, a hundred feet down, would be the bowl of which Stevick had spoken. The horses began the descent slowly, fearfully. After a time of sliding on their haunches and sometimes going sidewise to keep the precarious footing, the animals straightened out on the floor. The darkness was so thick that the men could not see each other's faces.

"Hop down," Don directed. "Drag your reins. We will go forward afoot. We can make it snappy. It's level enough all along here."

He set out and the three other men followed him. They came to a break in the wall of the mountains. Through it they could see the lower stars shining.

"Hell," Joslyn said, "somebody has been havin' a dream. Them fellas didn't bring no young stuff this way from them ranches over there—unless they carried them in their arms."

"There's another way, easier but longer," Don said. "They could make it that way all right."

"I hope to tell you it'd have to be easier," Mac said.

DON led the way through the draw. The bowl, in darkness, lay below them. Don could hear the sound of falling water and he knew that a stream ran down from the mountains somewhere nearby. There was in the thin air also the smell of lush grass. He saw that this was a rare mountain meadow, a place in which grass grew rankly because of a favorable combination of water and soil.

They stood looking down for a while till their eyes should become accustomed to the gloom. Presently there was a stir below them. Blurred forms moved.

"Cattle risin'," Don said. "Some of

them stolen calves has grewed up. Renshaw has been here for quite a while. I'm hopin' them fellas has got careless as they naturally might."

He was sure there would be no night riding of the small herd which the Renshaws had got together. It would not be necessary. The cattle would not drift away from the grass and the water out into the barrenness of the mountains.

"If they have been here for a long time, they ain't been campin' out," Don went on. "There is some timber over beyond here. They would have built themselves a log cabin anyhow."

"An' a corral," Joslyn added.

Don could get a fair picture of what lay before him. There would be the cabin in which the men slept by night. There would be a big corral for their horses. There would be the stock corralled in a natural stronghold. The cattle by now would have Renshaw's brand. Presently when Robert had been disposed of those cattle would be taken to the ranch by stealthy night drives. Altogether it was a pretty scheme, Don had to confess. That ol' fella Renshaw must have a good deal of patience, but when he struck he struck quick and hard. He had gobbled a ranch when it had been out of Don's hands only a few hours.

By now Don could see the cattle plainly. They did not look to be in good flesh. Already they were moving about the bowl in small groups. Don supposed that the grass was giving out. Renshaw would have to move the stock before long or it would starve. Things had been breaking pretty well for Renshaw.

As he gazed across the bowl a light suddenly appeared on the far side of it. Don studied it, to make out whether it was the light from an open fire or whether it was within a building. He decided that it was the latter. It settled down till it could scarcely be seen, but still there was an oblong of it. Don was sure it was a light within a room beyond a small window.

"See it?" he asked.

The men murmured that they did.

"That's headquarters," Don said. "Somebody has either just got up or just come in. We better work our way over there. I ain't never been in this bowl, so we will have to go step by step. We will hug the wall as we go along. That'll bring us to that building in the course of time."

They descended slowly and as slowly began to make their way around the bowl. They came presently on a little group of young stock, just distinguishable in the night light. The cattle stopped and sniffed apprehensively. Together the men began to chant a cowpunchers' song. The cattle listened for a minute and then edged away. The men went on, Don in the lead. He was aware at once that there was a break in the wall at his left. A yawning vacancy seemed to be there. This, he guessed, was the head of the box cañon of which Stevick had spoken. Looking up, he saw that the peaks lifted themselves higher here. The cattle they had come upon had probably been headed into the box.

"Straight ahead, boys," Don said in a low voice.

On top of his murmur came another voice, husky, strong.

"Stop where you're at. Stick 'em up."

"Down," Don countermanded.

With the other men he went flat, drawing his gun as he did so. He could not permit a hold-up now. He knew that if he were taken prisoner he would never leave this place alive. The Renshaws had too much at stake. With the gun in his hand he whipped the hand over his head and pointed it in the direction from which the voice had come. There was the sound of a footfall, as the man in there probably started for shelter. Don fired. There was a grunt, the sound of a plunging body, and then stillness.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTIVES

DON lifted his head and listened. The other men lay near him, silent, motionless. Don had two things to consider. One was his feeling at having killed a man as he had doubtless killed this man. The other was as to whether his shot had been heard over there where the light was.

He resolutely put away all thought of the slaying for the moment. This was war, and he had to believe that a slaying was inevitable in the circumstances. The important question, that man being dead, was as to what would happen next. Forgetting that this guard might not have been alone, he sprang to his feet. The guard seemed

to have been alone. At least there was no attack upon Don. He looked toward the light. In that instant the light went out. Then the shot had been heard.

Don could imagine what had happened. Some one was in a cabin where the light had shone. He had just arrived or had just risen. Believing himself secure, he had been preparing food or getting ready for sleep. That shot had come to his ears. He had had a moment of bewilderment. Then he had thought of the light and had put it out.

What would he do next? Indeed what would they do next? For Don had a notion now that more than one man would be in that cabin. His eyes, now accustomed to the gloom, traveled down the bowl. He saw that it was an oblong. The cabin, he judged, was built against the wall, just before the wall circled. Whoever was in the cabin would of course know that the man had been on guard over here. He would think the man had attacked or had been attacked. It would be natural for him to take the shortest way to the cañon. That would be around the head of the bowl. Don's best bet seemed to be to go in the other direction. Yet he could not leave without having a look at the man he had shot.

"Get up, boys, an' wait a minute," he said.

As the men rose, he ran into the box. His foot encountered a body. Standing with his back to the outside, he lighted a match and bent down. The light fell on a swarthy face, but it was not the still, masklike face of a dead man. The eyes were open, but there was life in them. They held a puzzled look, and Don judged that the man had just recovered consciousness. Don struck another match, and shielding the light let it travel over the upper part of the man's body. There was blood on the man's shoulder. Don saw that the heavy bullet, fired at short range, had smashed through that shoulder. The man tried to speak but his lips only writhed in pain.

"Take it easy," Don ordered. "It won't do you no good to bawl me out now. Keep still." Over his shoulder he called, "Mac."

Mac ran in and stopped beside him. Don directed Mac to cut away the shirt above the wound and to place a padded handkerchief over it. Then Don bound

this down with another handkerchief. That would absorb the blood for a few minutes and then help it coagulate.

"Somebody will be runnin' over here in a minute," Mac warned.

"I know it," Don said. "That light went out. But we've got to have this fella. We've got to take him with us. He is prob'ly full of valuable tips."

"It'd be better for us if he was full of lead," Mac growled.

"I'm glad he ain't. Get them other boys in here an' we will carry this fella with us."

In a moment, under Don's direction, they were hurrying along the side of the bowl toward the place from which they had come. When they reached the draw, they stepped into it and laid the wounded man down. Don knelt beside him.

"Fella, I shot to kill you," Don declared. "I missed because of the dark. You come clean an' quick to me an' mebbe you will live to tell the tale. Otherwise—" he shrugged his shoulders. "There's a cabin over there, ain't there? I saw a light."

"Cabin an' corral," the man answered thickly.

"How many men?"

"Five if Moore has got back."

"Who's Moore?"

"Just one of us."

"Where's he been?"

"To meet Renshaw."

"Where's Renshaw?"

"I dunno."

That, Don perceived, was the truth. The man was thoroughly scared. He was in pain. He had answered such questions as he could with a certain eagerness, as if he wished to ingratiate himself with the man who had shot him.

"Have there been any strangers up here to-day?" Don asked.

"Not here. I heard a young fella was brought in to the other camp."

"This is a kind of outpost, eh?"

"Yeh."

"Where did all these cattle come from?"

"There ain't so many. Renshaw an' some of the other boys rustled 'em in here. They been at it for some time. It is a hard place to get cattle to. Renshaw has been layin' low for somethin' better'n a few cows. I reckon he rustled 'em more to keep the boys busy than anything else, though he will grab anything he can. I ain't been here more'n a month. Used to

know Renshaw down South. Happened to meet up with him again. He said he had somethin' on. I wisht I had a drink."

"I'll get you one after a bit," Don said. "No time now. I'll have to leave you here alone for a while."

The man resignedly turned his head away.

"Come on, boys," Don said.

He led them along the side of the bowl till they were near the far end. Here the shadows fell heavily and they cut across the bowl and came up on its other side. They proceeded along this, softly, till they could discern the outlines of the cabin. There was no sound, no motion in or about the little building.

Don of course had no means of knowing whether the men were still here or whether they were proceeding cautiously toward where the shot had been fired. If they were waiting, they were expectant, desperate men, with guns in their hands. If they detected the men outside, they would shoot to kill. If they had gone to the other side of the bowl, they would come creeping back presently. Don decided that he must wait to see what developed.

He had to wait what seemed an interminable time. The night was passing. The first streaks of dawn would be coming before long. The growing light must not find him and his companions standing there. Yet he could not retreat. He had not only to capture these men; he had to discover from them where Renshaw and the others were. Undoubtedly young Renshaw had Robert with him. Don felt nothing but pity for Robert now. Robert, he feared, had not the fiber to stand up against those ruthless men. They had apparently coerced him into selling his ranch or giving it away. He would yield to them whatever else they wanted. And perhaps they would want nothing more. They might have brought him up here merely to dispose of him. Don saw that time was precious. He looked anxiously at the cabin.

There was no stir about it, but there was a sound beyond it, along the upper wall of the bowl. Then there was the grinding of heavy feet on the rock. Three dim figures, bearing a fourth, came into view. They stopped near the cabin door and put down their burden. Two other men emerged from the cabin and joined their companions.

"**D**ID they get him?" one of these asked, in the tone of authority. "On'y through the shoulder," one of the carriers answered.

"What happened to you?" the first man asked accusingly. "What in hell were you doin' to let 'em get you?"

"They come to the head of the box sudden," the wounded man answered weakly. "I tried to stick 'em up. One of them shot me out of hand."

"You tried to stick 'em up," the other jeered. "Why'n hell didn't you shoot an' talk about it afterwards. Who was they?"

"I dunno. Four of them."

"We found him in the draw," one of the carriers explained.

"In the draw? How'd you get there, fella?"

"They drug me over there o' course. They said you'd lose time lookin' for me an' that would help them to make their getaway."

"Where'd they go?"

"Up through the draw. I heard their horses, goin' hell bent in a minute."

Don, listening, was astonished. He could not imagine why the wounded man was trying to throw the others off the track. Certainly he could have no friendly feeling toward Don. Yet he was playing Don's game instead of the game of his companions in crime.

"Two of you fellas take your horses an' go up through that draw an' see what you can find out," the man in authority ordered. "I don't like the looks of this. I'll bet one of them fellas was that Don Fraser. Renshaw had a run-in with him this mornin'."

There was silence for a moment, and then there was a stir among the men. Two of them seemed to have backed away from the man who had spoken.

"You hear me," he snarled.

"We ain't goin'," one of those who had retreated said in a cold clear voice. "What d'ye think? Think we are goin' up that draw when them fellas may be layin' in it, waitin' for just such a move."

There was another indistinct stir on the part of this man and on the part of the other. Don could not see what they were doing, but he knew in a moment, from what the second man said.

"I got you covered, Moore. Make one move. Just one. I can see your hands."

Keep 'em idle. No, stick 'em up. You, too, Sadler. You an' Moore has been altogether too chummy lately. I ain't liked the looks of things. Moore goes over to see Renshaw an' when he comes back and I ask him what's up, he says 'nothin'. Well, mebbe! But that ain't the way I figger it. I'll take your guns till I see what's goin' on here."

He moved toward the man he had addressed and then toward another man beyond him, and Don was sure he took their guns. He stepped back.

"Now, you two other fellas, how do you stand? With me, I reckon. I been bankin' on it. I'm goin' to pay a visit to Renshaw an' have a showdown. You want to come along?"

"You betcha," they chorused.

"Come on, then."

The darkness took them at once. Don guessed that, luckily for himself, the corral was the other side of the cabin. That gave Don and his companions a moment for retreat. They went back along the wall a few steps and waited in the dark. Presently they saw the three men dash across the bowl, indistinct, flying figures. They were making for the draw, and Don understood that that was the only exit from the bowl. Apparently they had not been afraid that anyone would be waiting for them there.

Don let them go. He was ironically grateful to them. They had done him an important service.

"We'll get these two before they wake up," he whispered. "They prob'ly have got guns in the house, an' they will be goin' for them."

There was no futurity in that action. As Don and the three others moved forward, Don saw the two remaining men run toward the door of the cabin. He spat a bullet against the cabin's wall.

"You fellas stop where you are," he called. "We'll riddle you next time."

But the men had courage of a sort. The foremost sprang through the door. The other was two feet behind him. Don fired at him, but because of the darkness he missed. The man dodged, however, as if the bullet had gone too close to him for comfort. As he straightened up and made for the door, it was slammed in his face. Don thought he was working at the latch, but he could not get the door open; and

then Don guessed that the other man had dropped a bar inside it. He had no thought for the man outside nor for the wounded man on the ground.

"Come on out here, fella," Don called. "Make it snappy."

The man wheeled away from the door and came running toward them, his hands in the air.

"Get that damned skunk," he screamed. "Don't let him get away. Why, he slammed the door in my face and dropped the bar."

For him that was sadly true, but his manner of voicing it, his impotent rage, were ludicrous. In the air his hands worked as if he clawed for something he could not reach.

"Any windows in that cabin, fella?" Don asked.

"Two on the side next the open," the man replied. "None on the far side or the other end. One alongside the door. You better get back. That fella is a killer an' he ain't afraid of nothin'. He will begin pepperin' you here in a minute."

It was good advice and Don withdrew his men. He looked up at the wall beside him. There was a shelf up there, some dozen feet from the ground. If he could gain that shelf and creep along it, he could reach the far side of the cabin. Then he could do something which he believed that man in there would be afraid of.

"We got to take a coupla chances, Mac," he said. "I'm goin' to the far side of that cabin. You circle out an' watch the door. If that fella comes through the door, poppin' bullets, you pop one or two your own self."

"One," said Mac. "If I miss the first shot, spite o' the dark, I will shoot myself."

"Gimme a hand up here, Joslyn," Don requested.

Joslyn hoisted him up toward the shelf. He obtained a meager fingerhold and Joslyn hoisted him. He got a knee over the edge and drew himself up. He was immediately aware that the dawn was coming. There was a perceptible lightening of the air, and the odor from the bowl seemed accentuated. There was a smell of water and grass as if the earth were wakening with the approach of the sun. Don had often observed this phenomenon before.

He was in semi-darkness as he started along the shoulder of rock, but he had taken no more than half a dozen steps when

the light grew incredibly. Don knew that the sun was almost up beyond the mountains and that the light would grow here with amazing swiftness.

The man in the cabin had apparently done just what Don had thought he would do. He had found a gun and he had come to the front window alongside the door. A bullet suddenly shattered the glass and struck the rock above Don's head. He knew the man would take more careful aim for his second shot, believing he had time. Don therefore threw himself flat and dropped from the shoulder. He was diagonally away from the window now, and he ran toward the corner of the cabin. Evidently the man inside had been taken by surprise, for he did not fire till Don was almost beyond his range, and then the bullet did not come within two feet of Don. He gained the blank side of the cabin in safety.

He knew that the man could hear him because of the shattered glass, and he laughed loudly enough for the sound to carry. He was sure the man would not relish ironic laughter. The man did not. He proved himself an adept in profanity. He cursed himself, Don, the other men, and things in general.

"All of which is fac's," Don agreed, "but what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I'll kill you," the man cried.

"Pshaw, I thought we was goin' to have some fun," Don jeered. "One of your side-kickers said you was a real killer, an' here you are on'y threatenin'. I never heard a real killer threatenin'. I think you are a milk-an'-water guy."

There was a time of silence. The man had exhausted his temper in his outburst, and now very likely he was taking stock of his situation.

"What do you want?" he asked guardedly.

"You," Don answered.

"What are you goin' to do with me?"

"Hang you or shoot you prob'ly. I dunno which. We got both bullets an' ropes."

"By God, I'll fight it out, then."

"You will fight with your lungs full of fire an' smoke," Don told him.

"Fella, you wouldn't burn me out."

"Wouldn't I? You don't need to stop, because you ain't doin' anything that bothers me, but if I was you I would look

an' listen. You will hear the crackle of flames in about a minute."

"What if I come out?" the man asked, and there was a note of fear in his voice now.

"Why, I got a man standin' over beyond here," Don answered. "I dunno what he will do. It'd depend on how you come out, I expect."

"I got just one gun," the man declared. "Look! Here it comes through the window."

A gun landed on the ground beyond the cabin.

"I will come out with my hands so high my arms will be loose in the sockets," the man promised.

"Well, don't talk about it. Do it!"

There was the sound of a bar being lifted and the opening of the door. Mac's voice came, light, cold:

"Keep 'em high, fella. I promised to shoot myself if I missed my first shot at you, an' the mornin' is breakin' so nice I just don't want to have to keep that promise."

Don came around the corner of the cabin. The outlaw was standing before the cabin door, his hands as high as he could lift them. He was a big man, bearded, unkempt. He turned fiery eyes on Don. Don's jesting mood fell from him. He looked at the man with fire in his own eyes. He lifted his gun a little. Slowly the fire died out of the other's eyes. He wet his lips. His glance sought the ground.

There was a flood of light all over the bowl. Don looked abroad. Cattle were working down toward the water, nipping at the scanty short grass as they went. There was no sign of the other men. This big man here would have to turn informer, Don saw.

"Fella," he said harshly, "you know where Renshaw is. I don't. I'm askin' you no questions, but you know what I want. Babble. Babble, fast, fella!"

CHAPTER VII

"HE'LL KILL HIM"

ORDINARILY complacent about himself, overbearing, brutal, this man, Moore, could apparently tell when the jig was up. He was at heart a coward. He believed that he had just

escaped being burned alive or shot down as he left the flaming cabin. The prospect of either of those fates had been enough to shake his nerve. Loyalty to the men he had been associated with was not to be considered, Don knew.

So Moore essayed an ingratiating smile. Don was aware that that was the fore-runner of a plea on his own account. He would make a deal with Don if he could.

"No blarney," Don ordered. "It's information we want. Come through with it."

In a way Moore's mind appeared to be orderly. He could begin at a beginning.

"Them fellas that left here won't find Renshaw," he said. "Renshaw has been suspicious of them because they wouldn't go to the ranch with him. They think this idea of turnin' respectable is crazy. I reckon their pictures is abroad in the land."

"Renshaw is now five miles from here, safely hidden out. He has got a young fella with him. He—"

"You know who that young fella is," Don stated.

"Well, your brother. Renshaw is goin' to kill him, come night. Then we are all goin' to the ranch—was goin', I mean."

"You can lead us to Renshaw?"

"I reckon I'll have to."

"It's the only way you'll save your skin," Don told him. "If there is the least little slip-up, we will stick a coupla bullets into you."

"Oh, I'm down," Moore said.

Don turned to the puncher who remained.

"Will you help this fella carry that wounded man inside?" he asked. Herd this fella Sadler in there, too. We will leave you a coupla guns. You can hold these men here till we get back."

The wounded man inside and made as comfortable as possible and he and Sadler under the puncher's guard, Don led Moore out to Mac and Joslyn.

"Of course we ain't trustin' this fella, boys," Don said. "We will set him on his horse after we get our horses, and then we will follow him. If you have to shoot him, don't waste your bullet."

"We will blow him wide," Mac said, and Joslyn only smiled grimly.

In ten minutes they were ready and they trotted across the bowl toward the exit. At the head of the draw Don stopped the

little party. He did not think the men who had left would return, but he had to make sure. Ordering the men to remain where they were for a few minutes, he rode the length of the draw. He encountered no one. Returning part way, he called to the men and they came through the draw to him.

"Now, you get out ahead of us and ride, Moore," Don said. "Ride careful."

The ride was without incident. It carried them through mountains and into squat hills. Before they reached the edge of these, Moore halted.

"You are within half a mile of Renshaw," he said. "He has got four men with him. They are bad actors. That makes you five to three."

"Five to four," Don corrected. "You are with us, aren't you?"

Caught as he was, Moore had a flash of insolence.

"My gun would be for hire if I had one," he stated.

"Not to me," Don said. "I only meant that you will be on our side except for what fightin' there will be. I'm goin' to use you to prevent a fight if I can. Hop down, everybody."

They dismounted and "tied" their horses. Don instructed Moore to lead them toward Renshaw's camp without making a sound.

"Lemme know when you are within shoutin' distance," Don instructed.

The ripple of hills to which they presently came was not much higher than their heads. Moore stopped.

"Them fellas could hear you from here," he said.

"Not me," Don grinned. "You!"

"They will kill me if I double cross them."

"If they know it. Now, I'll tell you what you do: Me and these boys will hide out. You will yell for help. When them fellas come, you will pretend that you are all in. First sound you hear, down you go. When they bend over you, whisper 'water'. They will want to know what has happened to you. That will give us our chance. Now, listen, ol' timer. You must know that these boys are poison with their guns. I can shoot a little my own self. If we was amatoors, we wouldn't be in this business. We would have sent some men that wasn't amatoors. If you try to whisper a warnin' to them

fellas, we will know it. They ain't clever enough not to betray themselves. Are we all set?"

"I can't help myself," Moore answered.

"All right! When I give the word you yell. Leave the rest to us when them fellas come."

They climbed over the billowing hills and were screened from view.

"Do your stuff, Moore," Don ordered.

Some real terror must have been running through Moore. It was in his voice when he yelled half a dozen times. Then he dropped down and lay with his face pillowed in his arms.

There was silence for ten minutes, but Don did not grow impatient. He knew that those men would be alarmed by that cry. They would spend a little time trying to decide what was best to do. Then if they came they would come cautiously.

They came cautiously. Mac and Joslyn knelt below the little ridge while Don peered carefully over the top of it. His first intimation that Moore's call had been heeded came when there was a whisper of sound directly across from him. The men had indeed been cautious. They had not come running down the miniature valley which lay between this ripple of hills and another across from it. They had screened themselves by those other hills and now, Don was sure, they were over there just beyond where Moore lay.

Don knew that when a head was lifted over the rim, the eyes would sweep everything within their view. He dropped down. Even as he went, he was aware that a head was being projected above the other rim. Scarcely breathing, the three men waited. The owner of that head was surveying the landscape just as Don had expected he would do. But now, at last, his eyes must have come down to Moore's prone figure.

"Hi, there, Moore," a low voice asked, "what the hell has happened you?"

An indistinguishable moan came from Moore. The man was playing his part well. With his face buried in his arms, he was unable to see whether Don was watching him or not. Probably he was afraid to make a move, for fear Don, if he were indeed watching would misconstrue it, and shoot him.

"Moore, wake up," the voice came more insistently. "Is there anybody hidin' hereabouts."

10

Don judged that Moore lifted his head just sufficiently to let his weak words flow to the questioner.

"Nobody here," he gasped. "They got me back at the cabin. Put me out. I hobbled over here and went down."

There was now the definite sound of at least one man coming over the hill. This again presented a problem for Don. The man might have from one to four other men with him. They might remain concealed while this man went down to the prostrate Moore. In that event they would have the edge on Don, if Don showed himself now. But, if Don and the other boys remained concealed, Moore might look around and find himself unobserved. It would take him only an instant to warn the man that there was danger.

LUCK favored Don. The man spoke, briskly.

"Tumble over, you fellas, an' less see what's goin' on here."

There was the sound of a scramble over the hill.

"Roll him over," came a command then. "See if he has got a bullet in him."

Don signalled to Mac and Joslyn to come up, and as they rose, he flung himself up the hill. His gun went over the top and covered three men kneeling beside Moore. He was aware that Mac and Joslyn were only a fraction of a second behind him. The three guns menaced the men down there.

Their eyes fixed on Moore, their hands busy searching his body for a wound, they did not know they were so covered. Moore was playing his part desperately well. His fear had paled his face above his beard. His eyes were closed.

"One of you fellas move, an'—well, just let us see you do it," said Don.

Doubtless those ruffians had held up many men in their time. Very likely they had been held up. Swiftly they seemed to calculate their chances. They were frozen for an instant in their kneeling attitudes, and then they moved apart from each other a little. If they were going to draw, they would do it now, Don knew. But the men did not draw. Their heads came up and three pairs of eyes regarded the guns.

"It's for you to decide what you are goin' to do," Don told them. "You ain't got much time."

The men flung their hands aloft as if those three pairs of arms had been directed by one mind. There they knelt, staring sullenly at their captors.

Don's thoughts now reverted to Robert. He supposed Robert was alone with Renshaw. Renshaw would have no means of knowing who had called for help. He had doubtless sent these men out to discover what had happened. But what would he do when they did not come back to report. He might finish off Robert as he had all along planned to do.

"Keep 'em covered, boys," Don said.

He topped the ridge and went along it a little way to give the two other men free range. Then he slid down and came up behind the kneeling men. He took their guns from them.

"Where's Renshaw?" he demanded.

"Jest a little ways from here," a man answered. "Up a draw. He's standin' there with a gun in his hand, an' I hope to Gawd he blows some of you suckers apart."

"Get up," said Don.

The man rose. Don thrust a gun into the small of his back.

"Over the hill," Don said. "Be fast but careful."

The man clambered over the hill, Don keeping so close behind him that he could touch him with the gun.

"Lead me to Renshaw," Don ordered. "If you make a sound, I'll tear you apart."

There was a little flat before them and at the edge of it another row of uneven hills, somewhat higher than these. The man went across the flat on light feet. He turned as he approached the hills and made his way along them. Then he went up the side toward a depression. Passing through this depression, with Don still within touching distance of him, he came out to the edge of the twin mounds.

"Renshaw is up this valley two hundred feet," he said. "It turns sharp there and angles through a draw. Well, Renshaw's horse and that young fella's horse ought to be here. We left 'em here."

"Renshaw has got them horses then," Don said. "He was goin' to run away from you fellas."

"He'd quit to save himself," the man conceded without anger. "Who wouldn't?"

Don had to get rid of this man at once. He knew that, unarmed, the man would not return to his guarded companions.

"Where's your own horse?" Don asked.

"Up this valley quite a little ways. We brought them two other horses down this mornin'. Renshaw was goin' to take that boy some place. I reckon he was goin' to—well, lose him."

"Yes, lose him," Don said. "Murder him where there were no witnesses. Fella, do you want to ride?"

"I don't want nothin' else."

"Get out of here then, but don't make no noise doin' it. If I lay eyes on you again, I'll plug you."

"I ain't got no gun," the man said, and he started down the valley on swift, light feet.

Don paid no attention to him. Now his thoughts were fully of Robert. Pity for that youngster welled up in his heart. This was a terrible situation for a youth who had always been taken care of to find himself in. Don imagined that Robert had drained the cup of terror.

He could not be sure, either, that Renshaw was preparing to flee. The man might have gone immediately for his own horse and Robert's merely to have them ready. He might be standing in that angle of the hills prepared to shoot and then run. He would figure that he could escape on his horse if his attackers were on foot as they were likely to be. And in his flight he might put a bullet into Robert. The most important thing he had to do now, as Don saw it, was to dispose of the chief witness against him and his father.

So Don sped across the valley and gained the hills beyond it. Climbing one of these he found that the depressions in them were so slight that they made almost a continuous ridge. If he went along them, he would come to that angle which concealed Renshaw.

He went along as rapidly as he could without making a noise. He was within thirty feet of the end of the ridge and had come to a walk when he heard a voice. He was sure that it was Renshaw's voice, though it was thickened with wild anger. Renshaw was cursing. Oaths came from his lips in a steady stream. At first they were directed at nothing. Then they became definite. "Damned bronc," came to Don's ears. There was then a sound as of a scuffle. Renshaw cursed again, definitely.

Don knew what was happening and he

smiled. Renshaw was trying to get a bridle or a saddle on a refractory horse. He was in haste and he was adding to the horse's stubbornness by his own excitement. Don judged that Renshaw would have his hands full, and he ran to the end of the ridge and looked down. Renshaw had got the bridle on a wild-eyed horse and he was trying to bring him round so that he could clap the saddle on his back. The horse was pulling out to the end of the bridle rein. Red in the face, jerking on the rein, cursing a steady stream, Renshaw was making futile efforts to bring the animal up to him. A moment of quiet would have done more than all his excited pullings, but his very excitement kept him from using his head to get the quickest results.

DON shot his eyes beyond Renshaw to where Robert was standing, not ten feet from him. Even as Don looked at the youth, the latter made a movement which froze Don with astonishment. Robert's quieter horse, already saddled and bridled, was standing a little apart from the other horse. Robert was moving stealthily toward him. He came to him and took up the rein. Then, walking beyond the horse, so that the animal was a shield for him, he led the horse till it was opposite Renshaw. Renshaw's back was to him, and suddenly Robert dodged under the horse's head and made for Renshaw. Don's gun was in his hand. He did not know what Robert intended precisely, but he knew that he would dispose of Renshaw if Renshaw turned on the boy.

Robert was behind Renshaw, and still Renshaw had not noticed what the youngster was doing. Robert reached out and plucked Renshaw's gun from its holster. As he stepped back, Renshaw wheeled. Unaccustomed to the use of a gun, Robert had delayed an instant before he brought the gun up. As he did so, Renshaw struck out wildly. Don saw that excitement was still ruling him. If it had not been, he would have flung himself on Robert and have wrested the gun from him. As it was, his blow landed on Robert's hand, and the gun went spinning from it. Again Renshaw did not use his head. Instead of retrieving the gun, cowing Robert, and then getting his saddle on the horse, he leaped and seized Robert in his arms. He

was bearing Robert backward when Don went tumbling down the hill.

Don reached Renshaw in half a dozen leaps, and Renshaw was not aware of his coming till Don seized him by the shoulder, broke his hold on Robert, and flung him back. As Renshaw recovered himself Don handed his gun to Robert. Robert took it in an unsteady hand, and Don saw that he was breathing hard.

Don had kept his eyes on Renshaw. He saw Renshaw, now gripped by a deadly anger which swallowed up any fear he might have had, leap toward him.

Neither man was a boxer, so that there was no science in the fight that ensued. Don took half a dozen blows to the face and the body, but they did little if any damage. He kept boring in on Renshaw, and presently he knew that the man was weakening.

He had struck Renshaw. Renshaw had fallen back. He came in again, but as he did so, he staggered. His ugly face was very close. Don set himself solidly and sent a crashing blow to Renshaw's chin. Renshaw's hands dropped, and Don struck him again. He fell, slowly at first and then heavily; and he lay in a crumpled heap at Don's feet.

Don turned to Robert. Robert stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Boy," Don said, "you're good. You got nerve. I'm stickin' with you from now on."

"Me?" Robert whispered. "Got nerve? I was scared stiff, Don."

"But got over it," Don smiled.

"They put a gun at my head up at the house, Don," Robert went on. "They made me sign a deed. Then they brought me here to kill me. Renshaw was just taking me away to do it. When I saw Renshaw was busy with the horse here, I asked myself what you would do if you were here. I told myself you would get that gun. I tried to get it."

In his turn Don stared. He had influenced Robert, then? He had loomed rather large in the boy's mind. He would have to stick with him now. He would have to straighten him out in his work and keep him straightened out. He would have to become a puncher on the old place, with all its memories. Very well! Let 'er ride that way. Don Fraser thus relinquished his new freedom.

CHAPTER VIII

NO DIFFERENCE

THE party, gathered into one now, halted a mile from the Fraser ranch house. Don had one more job. He had to capture old Renshaw.

"You boys stay here," he said. "I'm goin' on alone. You wait for half an hour. Then come in."

As he spoke, he saw a glow in the younger Renshaw's eyes.

"Yeah," Don said, "I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' your dad will get me. No chance!"

He waved his hand to his friends and rode away. When he came to the house, no one was in sight. He stopped his horse opposite the kitchen door. Old Renshaw would have had no means of learning what had happened, and Don did not think the old fellow would start hostilities. He would keep to his new rôle of respectable ranchman.

Presently the door was opened and Renshaw stood in the doorway. A look of eager curiosity came into the man's eyes.

"I'm lookin' for your son," Don said.

"He ain't here."

"I haven't located my brother in town," Don said. "Has he been back here?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Well, I reckon he has run out on me." Don slipped from his horse. "I'd like to ask you a coupla questions if you will step out here, Mr. Renshaw," he added.

"My hearin' is good," Renshaw stated. "Go ahead an' ask your questions."

Huh, that old fella had somethin' on his mind, had he? There was a sort of subdued glow about him. Don had seen that he was not wearing a gun. Well, then, what made him so cocky? The answer to that question flashed through Don's mind, and he had all he could do to control himself so that he should not betray to Renshaw that he had discovered something. Why, Renshaw wasn't alone here. He was too doggoned sure of himself. A gunman without a gun, he was still confident.

"Why, you don't need to be afraid of me," Don said slowly. "On the other hand—"

He did not finish that sentence. He let his gun finish it for him. He whipped it out and pointed it at Renshaw with a grin on his lips. He gave no order to Renshaw.

He did not think an order necessary. The gun was eloquent.

At least Renshaw seemed to find it so. His glow departed and a sour rage came in its place. The killer stood revealed in place of the self-satisfied old gent whom Don had looked at there in the doorway. Yet he did not move. As Don advanced on him, he stood as if rooted. Don was three feet from him before Don spoke.

"Who is in the house?" Don whispered. "Nobody."

"I have caught your son and his whole outfit," Don said. "Unless you tell me who you got on guard here, I will blow you apart. There has been some gun play up in the mountains already."

"I got one man here," Renshaw sullenly admitted.

"In the other room?"

"Yes."

"Invite me into the house," Don ordered.

"Come in," said Renshaw as heartily as he could.

He backed away from the door and Don followed him.

"Laugh," said Don. "Natural."

"Laugh?"

"You heard me."

Renshaw laughed. It was a rather high cackle, but Don thought it might have passed for Renshaw's ordinary laugh.

"Now, natural again, call that fella out here."

"Oh, Fred," Renshaw called.

There was the sound of some one crossing the room beyond. The knob of the door was turned. Don was standing behind Renshaw, his gun leveled over Renshaw's shoulder. The door was pulled open carelessly, and a man with a gun in a holster stepped into the room.

"Up with 'em, Fred," Don ordered.

Fred's jaw went slack. He had that moment of indecision which sometimes comes to a man in those circumstances, but he at last suddenly raised his hands.

"Turn around and back over to me," Don ordered. When the man had done that, Don plucked his gun and put it on a table at his hand.

"Both of you march outside," he directed. "Take it easy."

The two gained the porch. Don was in the doorway. There was a thunder of hoofs on the road outside.

"Who's that?" Don demanded.

"Mebbe you'll find out," Renshaw snarled.

The party out in the road, Don knew, was made up of a number of riders. They were coming hell bent. They might be more of Renshaw's outfit. Well, let 'em come. Don knew that he might presently be riddled by bullets, but he would fire a few sure shots on his own account.

"I'll get you two fellas first if them men start anything," he said.

There was a slowing down of the riders at the road leading into the yard. Then they came on again. They came past the corner of the main part of the house. The eyes of all of them were turned toward the kitchen door.

Don had to laugh. He had to laugh at the sudden drooping of the bodies of Renshaw and Fred. He had to laugh at the looks of surprise and relief in the faces of Lacy and Graham, in the faces of Bess and Jean, and in the faces of the two men who were behind Graham and Lacy. The horses were pulled down. They milled together as they came around, and then they were drawn up across from the door.

"You got a couple there, son," Lacy said. "How about the others?"

Don gave him a rapid-fire report of what had happened.

"They'll all be in here in a few minutes," he concluded. "I got a notion that Mac and Joslyn will cut that half hour some. I wish these fellas could be taken off my hands. I ain't had no sleep an' I'm gettin' kind of droopy."

Lacy turned to the two other men.

"Take 'em into the house," he ordered.

"You got the whole outfit, eh?" Lacy asked. "You found some cattle, too. Good piece of work, I'd say. What you think, Graham?"

"A good piece of work," said Graham stiffly.

THERE was the sound now of more horses in the road. These horses came slowly, to accommodate their pace to the wounded man. They turned in at the road and were drawn up behind the horses of the others.

"There you are, Lacy," Don said. "I'm turnin' the whole mess over to you."

"I'll take care of them," Lacy said. "You boys get that wounded man into the house. We will have a doctor for him if he

needs one. Take the rest to the sheriff."

In ten minutes the men rode away with their prisoners. Graham looked at Mac and Joslyn, who had remained.

"You boys will be needed as witnesses," Graham told them. "You better get back on your jobs."

"We was gettin' kinda tired of our jobs," Mac grinned.

"You'll have to be around here for a while," Don reminded him. "You might as well be workin'."

"Mebbe that's so. Let's ride, Joslyn. We have had a little taste of somethin' else. Mebbe it will last for a few months."

They wheeled their horses and were gone. Graham looked at Don severely. Up to now Don had not looked at Bess. He gave her a glance. She was looking away from him. Don's eyes strayed to Jean. Jean and Robert had drawn together and were talking earnestly. There was something eager in Robert's face, and there was an answering glow in Jean's. Well, those two seemed better acquainted than Don had suspected.

"Can I speak to you a minute, Fraser?" Graham asked.

"Why, anything you got to say to me, you can say where you are," Don declared. "I tried to have some private conversation with Renshaw a minute ago, and he wouldn't stand for it. I reckon I stack up against you as well as Renshaw stacked up against me."

"Why, you can have it," Graham said angrily. "I confess you have done a good piece of work. I ain't surprised at that. Nobody is, I reckon. My grievance with you is personal. You made my daughter cry, an' any damn' man that brings tears to her eyes has got—"

"Father!"

This was Bess, a furious Bess as she turned on her parent.

"He wanted it out in public," Graham declared, his anger growing. "He is gettin' it. Fraser, everybody thought you an' Bess was as good as engaged. All of a sudden when you lost your ranch, you—"

"He hasn't lost his ranch," Robert broke in. "He and I are going to be partners. The ranch is as much his as mine."

"He is goin' to work for me," Lacy put in. "I am gettin' old. He is just the man to take the burden off'n my shoulders. I—"

"Hell," said Graham, "not so fast, you two. I owe this fella an apology. An apology consistin' of words alone ain't no apology. You ain't no older'n I am, Lacy. I got a better ranch. I can give this fella a better job."

"Better ranch," Lacy stormed. "Better job. How do you get that way?"

"I can't take all these jobs," Don said. "I'm not goin' to take any of them till I have slept on it. Can't you see I am near dead."

"Heck, you don't look dead to me," Graham declared. "Anyhow you can keep your eyes open till I finish. When you lost your ranch, you spoke to my girl as if that was goin' to make any difference to her. You insulted her. Why, she ain't the kind of girl to figger money matters or ranches, if she likes a man. I've knowed all along that her heart was set on you. I was watching you. You stacked up good till you made that break. You—"

Don had been hearing what Graham said, but he had been looking at Bess. He thought Bess would be furious, but Bess wasn't that exactly. She looked to Don as if she were fighting back tears of mortification. Gosh, was there no way to stop that old man's babbling? He was still running on, saying the same thing over and over now, almost in the same words.

Don started to turn on him fiercely, but as he did so, he saw Bess pull back her horse. He knew what Bess was going to do. She was going to make a dash for it.

She turned her horse and started. Don jumped. Three leaps carried him to his own horse. Another lifted him to the saddle. As he wheeled his horse, Bess's was in the road. He tore after it.

Bess could ride and her horse was fleet and fresh. Don's was a little tired. He had to ride a mile before he overtook the girl. Finding him at her horse's flank, she pulled her horse down. Don followed suit.

"There wasn't a word of truth in what my father said," she declared. "I haven't cried. Cried about you? Pooh, there are too many men in the world. Why, I'd forgotten what you said that time—almost."

Don did not reply. Bess turned her face front and they rode on in silence for another mile.

"Through stallin', Bess?" Don asked.

"Stalling?" she repeated.

"If so," said Don, "I would like to talk to you about all these jobs. No poor puncher ever had so many offers in the same day. I think I ought to stick with Robert. What do you think?"

"He will need help," she said.

"Well, let's figger it all out," he said. "You know how much store I set on your advice. It'll be a business talk."

As a business talk it was a rank failure, for they had gone no more than a quarter of a mile before Don reached out and took the girl's hand. She tugged, but not very strongly; and in the end she let her hand lie in his. That was most satisfactory for another quarter of a mile.

"Marry me, Bess?" Don asked.

"I'll see," she said.

A little coaxing, Don Fraser saw, was in order. A little coaxing, he discovered, went a long way with Bess. Pretty soon she was defending him from himself, so humble he became. And finally they rode together contentedly, as they had done in the old days.



Concluding

The Society of the Silver Shoe

A Tale of the Chinese Peril

By CHARLES GILSON

Preceding events briefly retold

Doctor MacKinnon, a craggy Scot, who has lived many years in Peking and learned the Chinese language and customs, is endeavoring to find out who are the ringleaders of a secret society. He knows the Society of the Silver Shoe is being organized to exterminate all foreigners in China. His aids in this task are Randal Archer of the American Legation and Captain Sir John Raikes of the British Legation Guards. They know that MacKinnon's compradore, Tong, is a member of the Silver Shoe and arrange for Archer, who is very proficient in Chinese, to shadow him in native costume and ascertain the society's meeting place. After patient watching Archer accomplishes his task and all three arrange to attend the meeting. MacKinnon has previously searched Tong's belongings and found a small silver shoe, which is the token of the society. He has had three duplicates made with which they hope to gain admittance to the meeting.

They disguise themselves in native costumes

and decide to pass Raikes off as a deaf and dumb nephew of MacKinnon's, because he does not know Chinese. They gain admittance by their counterfeit tokens, but when asked for their names, numbers and to show their brands they are up against it. MacKinnon quickly replies that they are new recruits, from a distant province in the South, and have attended this meeting for the purpose of being branded and assigned their numbers. This answer seems satisfactory, they are masked, as are all the others and allowed to enter the main assembly. Here they swear allegiance and are told to strip to the waist to receive the brand of the society.

Archer and Raikes both go through with it and are branded on the arm. MacKinnon is taken last, he hesitates about disrobing, endeavoring to get by with merely baring his arm. This, however, is not allowed so he strips, disclosing long livid scars across his left shoulder. As he is being branded a voice from the rear shouts:

"Hold! He, who stands before you was never Lu-Wei, or any other mandarin in all Yunnan!" Lu-Wei is the doctor's assumed name—the accusing voice is Tong's.

During the ensuing commotion MacKinnon is taken prisoner—Raikes and Archer, who seem to be momentarily forgotten, make their escape. They know it would be useless to fight against so large a number and realize that in their escape lies MacKinnon's only chance for help.

The American and British legations are notified and cause a search of the city to be made for MacKinnon. This proves fruitless.

When all official investigation fails to yield any clue of MacKinnon or information about the leader of the society, Archer, disguised as a Chinaman, goes to live in the native quarter of the city. One evening while wandering about he is conscious of being followed. He leads his shadower to a secluded spot and accosts him. The man is Tong who, recognizing him as MacKinnon's companion, tries to knife him. Archer shatters his knife hand with a shot from his pistol, knocks him down, picks up the knife and places it at Tong's throat. Fearing for his life Tong divulges the name and number of a recently deceased member of the society—which will enable Archer to attend the next meeting. Tong also tells MacKinnon's whereabouts. He is being held captive in the Temple of Seven Stars, many days' journey to the north. Nothing can persuade him, however, to tell the name of the Red Button Mandarin who is president of the society.

With this information Archer attends the next meeting of the Silver Shoe but learns nothing of

value. On leaving he follows the president to his home, thinking in this way to learn his identity. On reaching the gate he is dragged inside by the keeper. He breaks away, runs across the grounds, climbs the wall and drops into a blind alley just as the pursuit is entering it. Archer dodges through the door of an adjoining house and climbs to the top floor hoping to escape over the roofs to the main thoroughfare. On entering a room to reach the roof he finds Tong on the bed nursing his wounded hand. In his excitement Tong admits that the house across the alley is Chung-li's. Archer reaches the roof and escapes to his legation.

With Raikes' aid and some soldiers in plain clothes, from their two legations, Archer plans to make a raid on Chung-li's home that night—hoping to capture him for a hostage to demand the release of MacKinnon and to break up the Silver Shoe.

Before the raid they visit Tong and give him the choice of being made prisoner or working with them to rescue MacKinnon. Tong, believing his master Chung-li is about to be captured and realizing that the power of the Silver Shoe is at an end, agrees to help in effecting MacKinnon's release—especially as they offer him immunity for his past actions.

The raid is made, but Chung-li escapes through a secret passage, wounding Raikes and several soldiers. Archer and Raikes feel that Chung-li's first move will be to reach the Temple of Seven Stars and murder MacKinnon. To defeat this they organize a rescue party. Disguised as natives and guided by Tong they start at once for the temple.

CHAPTER XII

WO HUNG had no business to be in Legation Street at all. In that quarter beggars—especially beggars suffering from beri-beri—were not encouraged. Having passed the sentry unnoticed, with a definite purpose he had found his way to the American Legation.

He recognised Archer at once. He knew Raikes, too, by sight. Wo Hung may have been a pauper, ignorant and unlettered; he may have had a limited vocabulary, and been unable to write a single Chinese character; but, he had a memory that was little short of marvellous. His mind was, as it were, an encyclopedia of human faces.

He had had many years of patient, weary schooling, sitting by himself with nothing to do, at one or the other of the two main gates. Certain people passed every day at certain times, each bent upon his own affairs, of which sooner or later Wo Hung learned something; for he observed each man closely and overheard snatches of conversation.

His knowledge would often surprise one of those who had been charitable. He would thank him for the few copper-cash the philanthropist had slipped into his fleshless, outstretched hand, and he would wish him success in his business, stating with conviction what that business was—though the man concerned, to the best of his belief, had never spoken to Wo Hung before.

And thus it was that, in the course of many years, Wo Hung became more than a well-known character in the city of Peking. He was famous in a way; and his reputation reached the ears of Chung-li, the mandarin.

Here was just such a man as the president of the Silver Shoe required. He was a pauper and feeble, and therefore harmless. He was no gossip; he lived alone, friendless and a miser. He loved money, even more than the average man in a land of bribery and thrift. Wo Hung's services could therefore be bought without difficulty; while his wonderful memory for faces made him particularly suited for the post of Keeper of the Outer Door.

Chung-li was a man who trusted no one,

who did not neglect precautions. He wanted a spy in the society itself; and Wo Hung was the very man, since he would be the only member of the society to see his fellow conspirators before they put on their masks.

Wo Hung, as we have said, had stationed himself in Legation Street with a definite purpose. He held out a dirty hand, and whined, "Give alms! Give alms to one who starves!"

Archer pulled up in front of him, frowned and said: "You have no business here."

"Without food," said Wo Hung, "I die!"

"Then ask aid," said the American, "from the Silver Shoe that you have served so well, and not from foreign-devils whom you hate."

With Raikes he passed upon his way up Legation Street. Wo Hung rose to his feet, and did a strange thing: he took from under his girdle a knife that was weighted at the end of the blade, and in his wrath hurled this straight into the trunk of a tree. Then he hobbled after them.

Three times that day he was told to move on by the sentries posted outside the various legations. A Japanese soldier even seized him by the scruff of the neck, and frog-marched him to the Hatamen, whence he returned in the evening by way of the nullah, to lie up like an old dog-fox on the waste-ground by the British barracks.

Early in the night, a party of about twenty inoffensive-looking Chinamen, mounted upon short-legged Mongolian ponies, and accompanied by a dozen heavily laden pack-mules, foregathered upon the open ground before the Temple of Agriculture in the Chinese City, and left by way of the road that leads to Pauting-fu.

At about the same time, a beggar with a long staff came hobbling into the stable-yard of a great caravanserai not far from the Chienmen, in the squalid Chinese City. In this yard a camel train had halted at the end of its long journey across the desert. The lean Siberian camels lay deep in filth, slowly chewing the cud. The atmosphere was fetid with the peculiar smell of the animals, as well as a hundred other odors. An Arab pony in the stable near at hand was terrified at the close proximity of his evil-smelling neighbors; although his little Mongolian stable-companions were placidly asleep.

THE beggar with his long staff rapped violently upon the door of the inn. The landlord appeared, a drowsy Chinaman half drugged with opium.

"Your business?" he demanded.

"I am Wo Hung, the pauper," said the other, jingling a pocketful of silver dollars.

The landlord came down at once, and opened the door wide enough to admit his visitor, with whom he spoke in whispers.

The matter was arranged without difficulty. It was but necessary for Wo Hung to mention the Silver Shoe and the name of Chung-li, the Taolai, and to produce more money than he had ever handled in his life.

He was hoisted into the saddle upon the back of a sturdy Mongol pony. He was supplied with food and a bag of fodder. And then he left the Chinese City by the Nan-se Gate, whence he went to the north along the city wall, so that he might go down upon his knees and pray to the strange gods he worshipped before the Altar of the Moon.

By then Archer and his men were some miles upon their journey. Daylight found them encamped among the blue tree-covered hills that overlook the mud flats of the Hai-ho basin.

It was their object, throughout their long and tedious march, to avoid the main towns and—so far as it was possible—even the villages. Though they were all dressed as Chinese, they could not hope to pass themselves off as such. They had with them three or four natives whom Archer knew he could trust; but many of the party were blue-eyed, fair-haired Anglo-Saxons who could never pretend to be anything else, but the foreign-devils they were proud to be.

It was enough for them that the party at a distance resembled a Chinese caravan on the line-of-march; for, had that not been so, their presence in the wild country in the north of Shansi would have attracted hundreds of curious followers, who would have dogged their footsteps mile upon mile, reporting their approach in every village of the province.

However, in a country of such a vast and scattered rural population, they could not altogether avoid the habitations of human beings; and in addition to this, it was from time to time necessary for them to purchase fresh supplies.

In the sequestered villages where they called, they attracted more attention than they liked. They were never left to themselves for a minute. They would go to sleep surrounded by a crowd of inquisitive sightseers; and in the morning, when they woke up, there would be the same people, still regarding them with undisguised amusement!

At first these villagers were seldom inclined to be hospitable, they would protest that they were very poor; that they had neither lodgings to place at the disposal of the travellers nor any food to sell.

It was but necessary for Archer to appeal to their sense of humor. He had only to tell them that they were all as fat as mandarins for them to burst into laughter. And then they would get brooms and brushes and sweep out the local temple—the only building in the village that was not infested with vermin, for the simple reason that nobody ever went there—and here the strangers were at liberty to camp, lighting camp-fires upon the floor at the feet of hideous idols that all wanted repairing. One had lost a nose; another an ear; and they were all covered with cobwebs, as well as dust and plaster from the ceiling.

Tong, the compradore, was an invaluable member of the expedition. To a large extent they relied upon him for the route, and he proved such an excellent cook that he could produce a five course dinner from a fire lighted between two bricks, and baked bread in an old kerosene tin.

They had every reason to believe that Chung-li was on the road before them; and they were obliged to make many forced marches, as they had no means of knowing whether or not the mandarin had taken a shorter route. Skirting the southern slopes of a considerable mountain range, they came down into the upper valley of the Fuen Ho; and thence crossed another range only a few miles from the town of Kolan, where they knew themselves to be but a few days' march from the Hwang Ho itself.

That night Archer discussed his future plans with Raikes, who was now almost recovered from his wound.

"If Chung-li is in front of us," said he, "and whichever road he has taken, it is more than probable that he has passed this way. We are nearing the end of our jour-

ney, though the most difficult part of it is still to come. By some means or other, we will have to negotiate the Hwang Ho rapids.

"I may be able to get hold of some news in Kolan," he went on; "and therefore I'm going to leave you in charge of the party, Raikes, while I go into the city disguised. There's very little risk. If I can play the part in Pekin, I can do it here."

Raikes admitted the wisdom of this. As a soldier, he knew the importance of having accurate information. And besides, he had an almost childish faith in the ability of the American.

ARCHER left the camp, which had been pitched in a secluded place at the foot of the mountains, soon after dark and reached the walled city in a few hours. Thinking that he could not do better than find a native restaurant, he searched the principal streets for a likely place, and coming suddenly upon a theater where a performance was in progress, he walked boldly in.

He found the playhouse to be crowded with a number of people, all of whom were seated cross-legged upon the floor, paying the utmost attention to a very long-winded, poetical drama, the speeches in which appeared to be endless. The actors were dressed in richly embroidered robes, so costly that these unfortunate people had to be padded with layer upon layer of cotton-wool, so that the robes might not be soiled by perspiration. For the heat was intense, and there was no air in the theatre, in which there must have been assembled as many as two or three hundred people.

Archer was quite interested in the performance, though he had often seen Chinese plays before. The highest attainment in the way of his art seemed to be for each actor to shout as loudly as he could. There was no scenery of any kind, and the properties were few; while carpenters and stagehands calmly walked about the stage and did what they liked, smoking their opium-pipes and conversing loudly with one another.

Still, the American had not come into the heart of a Chinese city, disguised as a Chinaman, to study the native drama. He was there for a purpose, and that purpose he meant to fulfil. As soon as his eyes

had become accustomed to the dim light in the theatre, he began to look about him; and his attention was immediately attracted by a fat man who sat in front of the stage, whom he recognised at once as none other than Wen How, whom he had last seen in the *yamen* of Chung-li.

CHAPTER XIII

NEMESIS

ARCHER was quite sure that he had made no mistake, since Wen How's face was full in the light of a large lamp that served as a footlight.

Fortunately, he himself was in the shade, at the back of the crowd, on one side of the room. It was very improbable that Wen How would see him—though quite possible that the fat man would recognise him, if he did.

The American was fully alive to his danger. If Wen How was in the city, there was a good chance that Chung-li was also there. After all, this was the very information he had come to find out; and as the play was apparently going on for hours, he had plenty of time in which to decide upon some definite course of action.

Clearly he could not accost the fat man in the theatre. If he did so and was recognised, it would be all up with him. And yet, it was essential that by some means or other he should speak to Wen How.

He resolved to play a bold card, though he now wished he had brought somebody with him. However, he knew that if he kept his head he might easily succeed. Single-handed, he had little to fear from Wen How; and he was armed with a loaded revolver.

He got to his feet, and as noiselessly as possible, in order not to attract attention, wormed his way through the crowd on tip-toe, until he had gained the open air.

The theatre was in a little frequented and unlighted side-street, but quite near at hand was the main thoroughfare of the city, where there were many flaring lights over the booths of hawkers and pedlars.

In a neighboring inn he procured writing materials with which he wrote a brief letter in Chinese characters to Wen How whom he addressed by name. He had the

effrontery to declare that he had an urgent message relating to the affairs of the Silver Shoe, and that he would await Wen How in the street outside the theatre.

He experienced no difficulty in finding a messenger. Wen How was easy to describe; and one of the servants in the inn volunteered to take the letter.

The performance was still in progress, while Archer waited in suspense at the door of the theatre. The fact that the street was dark gave him a certain amount of confidence. None the less, he had his hand ready on the handle of his revolver when the bulky form of the fat man, supported by his short, bandy legs, came waddling down the steps, rather like a duck.

He looked Archer straight in the face, and bowed.

"It is you who wish to see me?" he asked.

Wen How's fate was already sealed. The devil-gods had marked him down as in a fit state to join the spirits of his ancestors. But he had never before been nearer death than at that moment; for the American stood ready to shoot at sight.

"I have the honor to address the distinguished Wen How?" Archer asked.

"That is the miserable name of my unworthy self."

As the fat man's eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness, Archer searched his face in vain for any signs of recognition. He could not refrain from taking in a deep breath that was half a sigh of relief. The god of luck was with him.

"I have journeyed hither all the way from Peking," said he, truthfully enough. "I bring a message to Chung-li himself; but I have no means of finding him."

"You are of the Silver Shoe?" Wen How asked.

The American slipped the loose sleeve of his Chinese coat over his shoulder.

"Behold the brand mark," said he.

Wen How smiled and winked and nodded, just as Archer had seen him do, not so many weeks before, in the Inn of the Almond Tree. He could not but regard it as little short of a miracle that the fat man did not recognise him as Wu, the Yangtse junkman, who had spoken to him then. He forgot for the moment the great improbability that they should meet a second time in the far distant city of Kolan.

A shadow came from the temple, and

vanished, as silent as a ghost, into the darkness of an empty shop on the other side of the street.

"Give your message to me," said Wen How. "I will see that it reaches the ears of his Excellency."

Archer took the fat man by an arm.

"I cannot do that here," said he. "Walls have ears." He little realized the truth of what he said.

Wen How accompanied him, chatting pleasantly of the play that he had seen and the priceless robes that had been worn by the actors, down the main street of the city to the open gate, through which they passed into a field of *kiao-liang*, where thousands of crickets were singing, and where there was a winding footpath that led upward toward the hills.

They sat down side by side upon a broken farmer's cart. There was no moon, but a thick, stifling mist that made the atmosphere like that of a vapor bath; in spite of the fact that there was a breeze that caused a continuous rustling sound among the long stalks of the millet.

Archer had no little reason to congratulate himself. Wen How was as good as his prisoner. If of his own free will he would not tell the American what he knew, he would do so quickly enough with the muzzle of a gun pressed against his forehead.

"You are from Pekin?" said the Chinaman. "It is not so long ago that I left the Tartar City myself. What is your news?"

Archer had now had plenty of time to make up his story.

"The government," said he, "offers the mandarin a lucrative post, a prefecture in the province of Kweichau, if he will deliver up Ma-ki-yuan into the hands of the Pekin foreigners."

"He will never think of it," said Wen How. "The man who is called Ma-ki-yuan will be tortured in the Silver Shoe."

"The post is well paid," urged Archer; "and the perquisites in that district are worth five times the salary."

"Chung-li has money enough," said Wen How.

"None the less," said the other, "I must see the mandarin himself."

"Then you will have to make haste," said Wen How; "for by this time he should have reached the Hwang Ho. He intends

to go up river on foot, traveling on the eastern bank, since on that side lies the Temple of the Seven Stars, whither he is bound. That is why I have been left behind. I came thus far on a mule; but I am too fat to walk."

"Has Chung-li many with him?" Archer asked. "I may have some difficulty in finding him."

"About a score," said Wen How.

The American gave a nod of satisfaction. The two parties were at least equally matched in numbers; while his own men were undoubtedly the better armed.

"And when did the mandarin leave Kolan?" he asked.

"Two days ago," said the other. "He is by now several *li* ahead of you; but, if you travel alone, you should overtake him without difficulty."

THE American had obtained all the news he wanted; and he had been absent from the camp only a few hours.

It occurred to him that there was something in the situation that was almost ludicrous. The fat man had delivered himself into his hands with the complacency of a lamb. He had been fooled to the top of his bent. He was as unsuspecting, and had been as candid, as a child.

"Look down!" said Archer, speaking quite calmly and altogether without emotion.

Wen How did so. And the light was just enough for him to see a revolver, the barrel of which was not an inch from his ribs.

"Hands up!" said the American.

Wen How obeyed. He was speechless, open-mouthed and open-eyed.

Something moved in the *kiao-liang*—a greater rustling of the millet stalks. A knife shot through the darkness—a knife with a weighted blade that could be hurled like a stone—a blade that sank deep into the heart of Wen How.

He fell forward without a groan from the old farm-cart upon his face, and lay upon the trodden earth, with a dark pool spreading from beneath him.

Archer sprang to his feet and looked about him. He could see nothing, but the tall *kiao-liang*, stirring in the breeze. He could hear nothing, but the constant singing of the crickets.

He was no coward, but a cold shiver shook him, as if he had been plunged into ice. Like a fool—as he described it afterwards to Raikes—he let out a shout that was nothing sensible or coherent; and then, like a dog, he took to his heels and ran.

And in the midst of the millet, the tall growing *kiao-liang*, lay a shrivelled, huddled corpse, with arms as thin as rails. Wo Hung, the Peking beggar, had breathed his last. His rapid ascent of the steep slope, the fierce, final effort of wreaking the vengeance of the Silver Shoe upon an unsuspecting traitor who would be used as a hostage for Chung-li, together with the slow, wasting disease from which he had been suffering for years, had proved the end of him. He had sold his worthless life for wealth, though he died loyal to the dreadful man he served.

CHAPTER XIV

THE AMBUSH

IN THE small hours of the morning, Archer came running into camp like a lunatic, and was all but shot by the sentry who took him for some fanatical Chinese affected by *chi*, which is Chinese madness.

He went straight to Raikes whom he awakened with a kick in the ribs.

"I've made a darned fool of myself!" said he. "Do you know, Raikes, there's something about this infernal country that beats you in the end. It's so mysterious and secretive, and though it's old as the moon, it's full of surprises."

Raikes sat up in his sleeping-bag and jammed his eyeglass in his eye.

"Have you waked me up to tell me that?" he drawled.

Archer sat down beside him, and calming himself a little, told his whole story from beginning to end.

"Well," said Raikes, "it doesn't look as if you'd much to grumble about. You've found out what you wanted to, though poor old MacKinnon seems to be in a tighter place than ever. What do you think they mean by the Silver Shoe?"

"Heaven alone knows!" Archer exclaimed. "Some infernal torture, an invention of the devil."

"And you've no idea where that knife came from?"

"Not the least," said the other. "Mind you, there was some excuse for me. I was surrounded by tall *kiao-liang* that might have hidden twenty men. I couldn't fire, because it was pitch dark, and I could see nothing."

"So you just ran like a jolly old hare?" laughed Raikes.

"Sure."

"And I don't blame you either, my son. I'd have done the same. It looks as if this business is going to end up in a kind of race; and MacKinnon's a lost man if we lose."

"That's about what it comes to," said Archer. "But we'll overtake Chung-li yet. There's a town on the Hwang Ho called Pauteh, where we can get rid of our ponies and mules, purchase a *wupan* and hire tow-coolies to take us up the rapids."

"Looks like a long job," Raikes demurred.

"The shortest route in the long run, and the safest," said Archer. "The bridle-paths across the mountains wind about in all directions. The river is more direct. If we start at daybreak, we should reach the Hwang Ho before nightfall, and we'll have stolen a march on Chung-li."

Their animals were even more exhausted than themselves when they struck the left bank of the great, roaring, yellow Hwang Ho, a few miles above the city of Pauteh. They had followed the course of a minor tributary that descended from the hills in a series of cataracts. Their presence in the valley excited a good deal of curiosity; for, no sooner than they had disposed of their pack-animals and purchased a large flat-bottomed *wupan*, or river-junk, than it was bruited abroad that a party of foreign-devils was in the neighborhood, and hundreds of the inhabitants came out to stare and laugh at them, with the same kind of amused interest as is evinced by the spectators in a monkey-house.

They did not mind this so much now, as the time for secrecy was past. As Raikes had said, the matter had resolved itself into a mere question of time. If they could overtake Chung-li and his men, they might in all probability save Doctor MacKinnon.

They loaded up the *wupan* with all their supplies and ammunition, and had no difficulty in obtaining coolies to tow the boat, as they readily agreed to pay high prices. Progress up the river, however, was a

tedious matter. The coolies sweated and sang at their work in the broiling heat of the midday sun. The current was so swift in places that they often progressed no more than two miles an hour. On the other hand, between the cataracts, when the river widened, there were long reaches of less turbulent water where it was possible to hoist the sail. And here good luck was with them, for the wind blew steadily from the south.

They were in a China very different from the mud flats around Peking. It was a land of romance, of rugged, inhospitable hills, the lower slopes of which were green with trees. And there were little villages tucked away in picturesque declivities, and pagodas and Taoist temples erected upon the river banks to propitiate the gods of the waterfalls and the ghosts of those who had been drowned.

Day by day, they worked their way upstream, halting as a rule at midday to give the coolies a rest, until they came to a large village that was called Wu Shen Chuang—No Gods Village—because an irate prefect had once turned Mohammedan and destroyed the Taoist temples.

It was when they were camped about three miles from this place that their coolies, who hitherto had been quite satisfied, suddenly refused to work any more, unless they were paid four times their stipulated fee.

This, of course, was preposterous. Archer tried persuasion, argument and threats; but all to no effect.

"There's some trick-work at the back of this," said he to Raikes. "Some one has put them up to it."

Archer himself with one or two others went into Wu Shen Chuang that evening to make inquiries. No one would tell him anything about a mandarin having passed up the river; but he learned that there had been heavy rains in the mountains to the northwest and that a great flood of water was reported to be rapidly descending, with the result that within a few hours it would be quite impossible to attempt to ascend the rapids.

The American, however, rose superior to the occasion. Realising that there was not a moment to lose, he purchased three sampans, and engaged the services of twenty additional coolies.

Returning to camp with these extra

hands, he ordered the cargo to be transhipped to the three lighter boats; and late though it was, they started that very night upon the final stage of their journey, the discontented tow-coolies being dismissed to find their own way back to Pauteh.

Midnight brought Archer's party to a gorge, on either side of which the great hills closed in upon the river. The cataract thundered through a wide ravine where there were rocks in midstream and many islands.

As the moon had now risen and they had not a moment to lose, Archer resolved to attempt the passage by night. He ordered one man only to remain on board each sampan to steer; while the others landed and assisted at the tow-rope.

They had with them a chest containing a considerable sum of money in dollars, both Mexican and Chinese; for it would have been quite useless to have brought paper-money with them into so remote a province. They were few among such a poverty-stricken population who could have changed a ten dollar bill.

As was obvious, they could not take this heavy chest ashore and carry it along the tow-path; and Raikes volunteered to act as steersman in that particular sampan, which happened to be leading the others, when their greatest calamity befell them, and they fell into the ambush that Chung-li had laid for them.

AS WAS inevitable, the mandarin had got word of their approach, and had lost no time in making his plans.

He had first despatched one of his men, dressed in the garb of an inoffensive peasant, with certain threats to Archer's tow-coolies instructing them to refuse to do any further work for the foreign-devil, whom he wished to keep in the neighborhood of Wu Shen Chuang.

The American's promptitude supplied a countermove, with the result that Chung-li decided to attack farther up the river. He selected a place most suitable for his purpose, where the tow-path ran along the crest of a steep face of rock at the foot of which the water swirled and seethed, forming innumerable eddies that revolved in the moonshine like so many rapidly revolving silver disks. On the other side of the path, along which the coolies must pass,

was a steep bank clothed in shrubbery, in the midst of which the mandarin concealed his men, all of whom were supplied with modern fire-arms.

Archer had been lending a hand at one of the tow-ropes; but, finding that his hands had become badly blistered, he had now walked some distance ahead of the column, and had passed the ambushade unseen, when Chung-li's men opened fire upon the first batch of coolies.

The irregular volley that echoed in the gorge drowned for the moment the constant roar of the water, that was like the churning of a mill-wheel. On the instant the night was filled with wild shouts and oaths; and Archer, turning sharp upon his heel, beheld a tragedy, the sight of which took his breath away.

The coolies who bore the brunt of the attack were those who were towing the sampan in which was Sir John Raikes and the money-chest. One of these men, at least, was killed, and many seriously hurt, with the result that the tow-rope was dropped to the ground—to be whipped almost instantaneously into the river.

Raikes himself was conscious of the sampan giving a jerk, a sudden jolt, as the little boat caught the full force of the stream. She spun round like a top, and was then hurled down the rapids at an alarming velocity.

Raikes was helpless. Archer caught a glimpse of him in the moonlight, sitting in the stern, changing his eyeglass from one eye to the other. And then he vanished into the darkness, into the midst of the raging and tempestuous river, shut in by the black shadows of the gorge.

All this had happened in the space of a few seconds. All was consternation and confusion. The coolies, as one man, fled for their lives. A second sampan was flung headlong down the river; but the third was saved by a man who twisted the end of the rope round a tree-trunk and made it fast.

Fortunately, the majority of Archer's followers were trained soldiers from the American and British Legation Guards in Peking. They did not wait for orders. They took such cover as they could find, and opened fire upon the ambushade, though they could see nothing of their opponents. Strive as he might, Archer could not join his men. To run the gauntlet down

the tow-path would mean that he must pass within a stone's throw of the ambush. Regarding Raikes as lost, he hastened to a clump of trees, a little further up the path, and there flung himself down upon the ground.

Almost at once, he was surprised, and somewhat startled, to hear a voice quite near to him—a strained, breathless whisper.

"My master, it is you! This is the work of Chung-li himself."

Though it was dark beneath the trees, Archer knew Tong's voice at once.

"You are safe?" he asked.

"I am doomed," groaned the man. "I have known all along that Chung-li would triumph. He is the servant of Yen Wang—the devil-god. Of a certainty, I die in torture!"

"Lie still," growled Archer. "We will yet come out of this alive, as I told you once before."

It was impossible for the American to fire. He could see little or nothing; and from his position, as like as not, he would hit his own men. For several minutes, while the fight continued, he was obliged to remain an anxious and impotent spectator.

The mandarin must have enlisted more men in the neighborhood; for there was no question which side had the advantage in numbers. Although the white men were the better shots, they were not familiar with the ground, and in the end, the Chinese working round the only open flank, compelled them to retire.

They did so in good order. Archer, who made several attempts to regain his own men, invariably found that he was cut off by the enemy. Indeed, what happened in the end the American did not learn until many weeks afterwards. Suffering remarkably few casualties, by reason of the erratic shooting of their adversaries, the men—under the command of an American sergeant, called Somers, retreated some distance down the river, until they came upon a ruined house which they utilized as a redout.

There they stubbornly held their own, though Chung-li tried for more than an hour to capture the place. In the end, the Chinese were obliged to retreat, leaving many of their number dead upon the ground.

The mandarin then returned to the scene

of the fight, with the savage intention of murdering any wounded he should find upon the tow-path; and this drove Archer and his Chinese companion to seek a hiding place among the hills.

In the early hours of the morning, he and Tong searched in all directions, but could find no trace of the others who had by then retired far down the valley.

Archer found himself in a dilemma, in addition to which he was considerably depressed. He had little doubt that Raikes was dead; and by now a very deep and sincere friendship had been established between the young American and the English soldier-baronet. Raikes may have been affected, but he had nerves of iron and was always in a good humor—a cheerful and willing comrade.

It did not look then as if Archer himself would come out of the affair alive. By nightfall sheer fatigue, as well as disappointment, had told upon his nerves. He and Tong found a cave in the midst of the hills; and there, without blankets or food, and without venturing to light a fire, they lay down to rest.

"Master," said the Chinese, "a great misfortune has befallen us, Chung-li is a very fiend."

"Nevertheless, Tong," said the other, "I will not turn back. Listen. Whether or not you choose to come with me, I am going to try to find my way to the Temple of the Seven Stars; I'm going to try to save Ma-ki-yuan. As for you, you are free to do as you please."

The Chinese never moved a muscle of his face. He sat motionless, staring straight in front of him.

"If you journey to the Seven Stars," said he, "though I believe your life will not be worth a copper cash, I, too, am coming with you."

CHAPTER XV

THE WATER TOWER

THERE is a certain matter-of-factness about the Chinese. Though they have no idea of the meaning of time, and will argue for hours about nothing, they are a practical people, and go about their business in a practical way, minding their own affairs.

Archer may have formulated his plans;

he may already have had a definite idea of what he intended to do; but, if that was so, he certainly said nothing about it to Tong. The man, as it were, took him on trust; and in that he showed his wisdom, for he knew well enough that he was safer with Archer than by himself in that wild district with Chung-li upon his track.

Before sunrise, guided by the stars, they struck into the mountain range to the east of the great river. Inquiring in the villages through which they passed, they were told that if they crossed the mountains to the north, they would come down again into the river valley at the Water Tower, whence the remainder of their journey to the Temple of the Seven Stars would be a short *li* and a straight road.

No one who is not familiar with the Chinese method of estimating distance would understand this; but, the fact is a *li* is not a lineal measurement at all, but a measure of time; so that, if you are going up hill, a *li* is about half as long as if you were walking the other way. The *li* being short between the Water Tower and the Temple merely meant that the country was flat.

However, these two strange traveling companions had a rough journey across the mountains which were rugged and desolate. The country was altogether uninhabited, and they had no means of obtaining food. But, in two days, utterly exhausted, they descended once more into the valley of the great river, where they passed through a thickly wooded country. And then, upon an evening when the sun was setting, they beheld before them the Water Tower itself.

There it stood, in a glow of red and amber—a pagoda, with a curved tiled roof, the eaves of which were supported by a number of grinning gargoyles with the faces of dragons and monkeys. It was six stories high; and about a hundred yards before it was a memorial archway, standing by itself.

They had purchased some food late that afternoon, and had hurried the latter part of their journey, since it was obvious that a storm was gathering in the west.

"We sleep here to-night," said Archer. "By the look of things, it is as well that we have a roof above our heads."

Passing under the archway, they followed a paved path to the entrance of the

pagoda, where, in the lower room, they flung themselves down upon the floor, too tired to walk another yard. It was then dark; and as they lit the fire to cook their millet, the first peal of thunder rolled along the mountain tops.

Too weary to talk, they ate their fill and quenched their thirst with water from the river. Then, stamping out the fire, they lay down upon the hard stones and fell asleep. And as they slept, the thunder drew nearer, each thunderclap being echoed and re-echoed from one mountain range to another.

Archer slept soundly enough throughout the first part of the storm. It was not until the thunder was at its loudest and almost immediately overhead, and the lightning so vivid that there were moments when the whole valley was as bright as day, that he awakened quite suddenly, sat up and looked about him.

He could see nothing, though he could hear Tong breathing heavily, sound asleep.

The American would certainly have believed that he had been awakened by the thunder, had it not been that he was strangely conscious of a feeling of insecurity, a sensation similar to that which can be experienced by some people who are aware that there is a cat in the room, though they have never seen it. He listened, and could hear nothing in the intervals between the thunderclaps, save Tong's heavy breathing.

He got to his feet and went to the door. Without it was pitch dark—as black as Erebus.

A sudden flash of lightning that endured for a whole minute converted the darkness into a blaze of shimmering, blinding light. And then—blackness again. But in that momentary glare Archer was certain he had seen, moving rapidly along the river bank, a little distance beyond the great memorial archway, the figure of a man.

He went down at once on hands and knees, and began to crawl forward in the darkness. He came in a little while to the archway in the shadow of which he lay hiding, while the sky was illumined by another flash. Immediately afterwards, it was as if the flood gates of the heavens had been opened. As at a word, the rain came down in a deluge.

Yet the storm continued, the lightning

as constant, and the thunder as loud as ever.

A voice rang out—a voice that Archer recognized at once.

"This way, fools that ye are! Unless we find shelter, we are drowned like so many rats."

It was the voice of Chung-li. Moreover, it was obvious from his words that he was not alone. He, too, and his men sought shelter in the tower, where Tong was sleeping as only a Chinaman can.

Archer sprang to his feet and, casting discretion to the winds, raced for the tower. He was at once challenged, ordered to halt; but, paying no heed to this, he hurried on, to warn Tong in time.

A shot rang out, at the very moment when another peal of thunder rent to the sky, and a bullet whistled within an inch of Archer's ear.

THOUGH he had not far to go, he reached the lower hall of the pagoda, breathless, and there stumbled over the prostrate figure of the sleeping Tong.

"Wake up!" he cried. "Chung-li!"

The man was on his feet in an instant, to be seized by a wrist, and dragged by force towards the doorway. There another flash of lightning made it clear that there was no escape; for Chung-li himself, with five men or more behind him, was not ten yards in front of them.

They could see the mandarin's tall figure, like that of a gleaming ghost in the midst of the storm; and they could see, too—so bright was the lightning—every feature of his lean, hawk-like face.

Tong turned, terrified, and fled at the sight of the man, seeking shelter behind an altar of red granite in the center of the room.

Archer attempted to fire at the very moment when darkness came again. It may have been that the cartridge in that chamber was wet, for the thing misfired, as Chung-li flung himself forward.

The American retreated, resolved to fight it out in the pagoda itself, where he found Tong, cowering behind the granite altar, almost paralyzed by fear.

"Your gun, man!" he cried. "Get as good price for your life as you did for most things when you were a compradore."

It may have been that Tong saw a kind of grim reasoning in this argument, for he

was a changed man on the spot. In the frenzy of one who is not in complete possession of his senses, he hurled himself straight at Chung-li and his men, who now stood shoulder to shoulder in the doorway.

There followed in the next few seconds a deafening pandemonium. To the crashing of the thunder was now added the sharp reports of fire-arms, discharged in rapid succession in a confined and shallow space.

It was little short of a miracle that there remained a man in that strange, ancient room who was not either killed or wounded. Two, at least, of Chung-li's men soon lay dead upon the floor, while another had received a mortal wound in the throat. And over the insensible bodies of these the others tripped and stumbled in the intermittent periods of utter darkness.

The mandarin was bleeding from the head, a bullet fired by one of his own men having grazed his skull above the ear. Archer, too, was soon aware that the long sleeve of his coat was wet with blood, though he was unconscious of any pain.

Tong fought like a madman, knowing full well that he could expect no mercy from Chung-li. Shrieking profanity, he lashed out right and left with the butt-end of his revolver, until he was seized by the throat, and lifted bodily from off his feet.

He kicked and struggled like a hen, and was as helpless in the powerful arms of the mandarin himself. During a pause in the thunder and the firing the American heard Chung-li's voice—and he was laughing.

"You would match yourself with me!" he cried. "I can show the folly of that to a traitor to the Silver Shoe!"

Even then Tong was all but strangled. He was black in the face; he felt as if his eyes were being squeezed out of his very head by the constant pressure of those great, bony fingers. His arms hung helpless, limp. The fight had gone out of him; he was at the end of all resistance.

With a kind of wilful petulance and still laughing, the mandarin pressed his thumbs deeper and deeper into the throat of the unhappy wretch. Peering into his victim's face, while the lightning flashed through the open doorway of the room, he beheld eyes that were white and wide and staring. And then, and not till then, did he let Tong fall upon the floor, where he lay motionless and huddled.

Archer, in the meantime, had been driven to the far end of the room. Believing himself to be wedged into a corner with no chance of retreating further, he was surprised to discover at his very back the first stone steps of a narrow spiral staircase.

In an instant, taking advantage of the darkness, he was half way up the stairs, at the top of which he found himself in the second story of the tower.

On he fled, with no idea whither he was going. Nor did he pause to think. It was enough for him that his enemies were behind him, and since there was no retreat that way, there was nothing he could do but go on and on, mounting story by story to the very summit of the tower.

Each room he came upon was smaller than the one below, as is invariably the case in these strange Oriental buildings. And each had many windows through which the lightning could be seen, glimmering constantly in the sky.

At the top of the tower there was a great stone water tank that was now filled to overflowing—for the rain still descended in a downpour. Archer could hear the water, like the beating of a drum, streaming from an overflow pipe upon the projecting roof of the story immediately below.

He paused a moment, his heart knocking like an engine, panting from loss of breath. The sleeve of his coat had been wet with blood, but now, in a few seconds, he was drenched to the skin. In the open air, it was as if the thunder was about his very ears, and by the light of the lightning he could see the jagged crestline of the hills on either side of the valley.

Better, he thought, to hurl himself from the tower than to fall into the hands of the Mandarin Chung-li, to go as a prisoner to the Temple of the Seven Stars. Though he had never thought seriously of such a crime, it was the idea of it that took him to the parapet and caused him to look down.

HE OBSERVED at once the peculiar structure of the building. Each story had, as it were, a roof of its own; and as each room was bigger than that immediately above it, it followed naturally that the eaves of these roofs projected after the manner of a flight of steps.

It looked easy to descend—especially as the roofs curved upward at the corners, in

the usual style of the Chinese architecture, but since he looked down upon these roofs from above, he obtained in consequence a wrong idea of the distance between each. At the same time he neglected also to remember that it would be no easy matter to find a foothold on the glazed tiles, which were slippery with rain and glittered like silver in the lightning.

He never hesitated. Here, at least, was a chance. The worst that could befall him was no more than he had already thought of. If he slipped and fell, death should be painless and immediate—more than he could ever hope for, should he be captured by his enemies.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the overflow pipe from the tank, and saw at once that this might be of use to him. Seizing it with both hands, he gradually lowered his weight over the parapet, and immediately, for the first time, became aware of a severe pain in his wounded arm.

It may have been that this compelled him to let go sooner than he meant; for he fell like a stone upon the roof below. He landed on his feet, but immediately slipped and fell. And then, to his utmost alarm, he felt that he was sliding slowly, by inches, down the roof.

Frantically he tried to dig his nails into the hard tiles. There was nothing within his reach that he could grasp. The roof was smooth as ice, and as slippery in the rain. He moved with slow precision to what seemed certain death.

Quite suddenly he stopped. He took in a deep breath. His feet had come to rest in a gutter that was strong enough to support his weight.

When a man is suddenly delivered at the eleventh hour, a kind of ecstasy takes possession of his soul. He is filled with a sense of triumph. He was inclined to believe himself immune.

And so it was with Randal Archer. He was not only determined to escape, he was now convinced he could. Without another thought, and with no shade of fear, he glided to the edge of the roof, gripped the gutter with both hands, and dropped to the roof below, where he actually kept his balance.

And thus he continued his descent, receiving no hurt of any kind, though the last drop was twenty feet or more. In a moment he was on his feet, and set off

running as fast as he could along the bank of the swollen, raging river.

The rain ceased a little after that, in spite of which he ran in water that was often ankle-deep. As he hastened onward, with no idea in which direction he was going save that he followed the course of the river, he heard the thunder rolling away in the distance, where the lightning played amid the peaks of far-off mountains.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TEMPLE OF THE SEVEN STARS

ALMOST unable to believe his own good fortune, Archer hurried on, until he came to a dense wood, above the tree-tops of which he beheld the rising of the moon.

He knew by that that it wanted but two hours to daybreak; and knowing that Chung-li would search for him as soon as it was light, he thought it best to turn away from the river. Not only was he exhausted, but his arm now pained him considerably; and his sole idea was to find some safe hiding place where he could rest.

After the heavy rain, it was as if the trees were growing in a marsh. Water lay everywhere in pools that reflected the moonlight in such open spaces as there were.

At last, he seated himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and reviewed disconsolately the situation in which he found himself. He had every reason to be depressed. Raikes, he was convinced, had been drowned in the tempestuous waters of the Hwang Ho. Tong had joined the spirits of his forebears, the victim of the vengeance of Chung-li. MacKinnon, perhaps, was still alive, but awaiting an even more terrible end. In very truth, it looked as if the Silver Shoe was still a power to be reckoned with!

And yet, something of determination gripped the American. In this long chapter of calamities it was as if his own life were nothing.

He rested for an hour or more, and then got to his feet. Drenched to the skin as he was, wounded and alone, he yet experienced a feeling that was like an inspiration. He had, at least, succeeded in his original intention—he was ahead of Chung-li.

Daylight found him upon a barren plateau, whence he could look back above the wood through which he had passed. He could see the river, following its devious course, and the Water Tower in the distance, standing alone, looking like a pawn upon a chess-board.

All that day he journeyed northward; and towards evening, being famished and so weary that he could scarce place one foot before the other, he entered a straggling village upon the hillside, where for a few copper-cash he purchased a little meat and millet, the inhabitants never suspecting for a moment that he was a foreign-devil, but taking him for a traveler from a distant province.

He slept that night in a grove of almond trees, not far from the village, and slept as he had never slept before, to awake refreshed and to find that his wound—that he had done no more for than wash in clean water—no longer pained him.

All that day, he continued his journey; and when the sun was again sinking, he reached the crest of a long, stony ridge, and looked down upon a plain where he beheld what seemed to him, in the gloaming and the evening mist, a fairy palace. He had come at last to the Temple of the Seven Stars.

There lay his goal, the end of his endeavor—the end, perchance, for aught he knew, of life itself.

The building stood upon the summit of a steep, flat-topped hill. The great walls looked as if they had been built upon the very edge of a cliff. It was a massive, solid edifice, more like a fortress than a temple, a mediaeval battlement.

There were many windows in the walls; but these were all narrow like loop-holes, and they were not arranged in tiers, but were dotted about haphazard, as it seemed. There were seven towers or turrets, though at that distance no path or road was visible, leading to the entrance.

There was something so grim and for a moment, Randal Archer faltered. For bidding in the aspect of the place that, for the fraction of a minute, his resolve was weakened. And then, he remembered that somewhere beyond those frowning walls was his old friend, Doctor MacKinnon, the man whom he had journeyed so many miles to save.

That was enough for him. He continued

on his way, though darkness caught him before he had reached his destination.

At the foot of the hill, by sheer good luck, he had found a path that brought him to the gateway of the temple. Here was a great door, studded with nails, upon which there was a knocker of brass, fashioned in the shape of a Chinese shoe.

Archer seized the knocker, raised it, and let it fall.

He waited. And then he knocked again. The silence that followed was unendurable. It was as if he waited for hours.

Suddenly a wicket in the gateway was flung back, and a face appeared—the face of an old, wizened man, with a bald head and eyes so small that they were like beads.

"Who is there?" he asked.

Archer had already rehearsed the part he meant to play.

"A student from Peking," said he. "A pilgrim, if that likes you better."

"And what do you want here?" asked the face at the wicket.

"A lodging for the night. In this wild country I can find no inn; and I am afraid of brigands."

That seemed to interest the old man; for he brightened up and spoke more eagerly.

"Then you have money?" he asked.

"I am a poor man," said Archer; "but, in reason, I can pay both for my lodging and my fare."

"That is enough," said the other. "Here we are all poor, save the head priest. For myself I am very poor. It is the custom of the few visitors we see to have pity on my poverty. I will unlock the gate."

THE American at once saw a chance of making this man an unconscious ally. The doorkeeper—like most lamas, priests and monks in China—was nothing but a mendicant, who begged of everyone he met. In all probability, too, he would do almost anything for money.

The door was opened; and there stood the priest in his yellow robe, with a lantern in one hand, and holding out the other, palm uppermost.

"A few cash!" said he. "And the gods reward you!"

Archer laid a hand upon one of the old man's shoulders.

"You ask for cash," said he. "What if I give you dollars? It may so happen

that I may have to leave this place in a hurry, when you are asleep or absent from the gate. I want you to show me where you keep the key."

The old man's curiosity was concerned only with the amount of money he got.

"How much will you pay?" he asked.

"Three dollars," said Archer.

"For four I will do it," said the other.

Archer counted out four dollars into that outstretched, skinny hand.

"But I said five!" exclaimed the priest.

"Then, there is one more."

"Did I not say six?" he asked.

"No. You have got more than you expected. However, we understand one another. Show me where the key is kept?"

The gatekeeper opened a slot in the wall.

"It lies here," said he. "To open the door, you must turn it twice in the lock."

"You have earned your money easily," laughed Archer. "But, I have journeyed from afar, from a distant province; I am a stranger in this neighborhood. Tell me about the temple, of the brethren? Are there any strangers here?"

The old man became confidential. He drew quite close to Archer and tapped him on the chest. His breath smelt vilely of garlic.

"We have a foreigner here," said he, "a big man, very hairy, like an ape. But, though a barbarian, he is a great scholar. He can read our sacred books. He has had many discussions with the head priest, who is also a learned man."

Archer shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not believe you," he declared.

"How can a man be hairy as a monkey? And how can a monkey understand the Book of Odes? Can you blame me, if I refuse to believe that such a man exists, unless I see him with my own eyes?"

It was now the old gatekeeper's turn to laugh.

"And that you will never do," he chuckled. "Even I never see him. Within these outer walls are inner walls, surrounding the sacred court, where no one goes but priests of the sixth degree. There also is the Silver Shoe; and when the foreign-devil came here, we thought that he would die in the Shoe in torture. Instead of that, he has become fast friends with the head priest himself, with whom all day long and half the night he talks and disputes and argues."

The American—who found what he had already heard by no means encouraging—thought it best not to display too much curiosity in regard to the prisoner in the temple.

"And where am I to be lodged?" he asked.

"In the monastery," said the other. "With the junior brethren. If you follow me, I will take you there."

At that, the old man, with his lantern in his hand, led the way across an outer courtyard, upon one side of which there was a low, two-storied building, where many of the windows were illumined.

PRESENTLY, Archer found himself in a long room, where there were about twenty monks, seated cross-legged on the floor. Many of these had the faces of criminals or lunatics: receding foreheads and chins, and deep sunken eyes.

For all that they received the stranger with courtesy. Archer found it very difficult to understand what they said; for they spoke a strange Mongolian dialect and knew very little Mandarin Chinese. And this was just as well for him, for he had not the least idea what he was supposed to do.

He gathered by degrees that he was expected to offer up his devotions to the local deity, and to give alms in the temple. Accompanied by one of the monks, he crossed the courtyard and entered a building that was dimly lighted by several iron lanterns, very beautiful in design, some standing upon pedestals, others suspended from the roof.

In the center of the nave, surrounded by bronze railings, was a great image of the Buddha, seated cross-legged in his customary attitude.

Here, following the monk's example, Archer went down upon his knees on a praying-mat, bumped his forehead on the hard stone floor, and before he left, dropped a few copper-cash into an alms-box at the feet of the image.

He returned to the refectory, where he was given rice to eat with which there was chopped-up goat's flesh; and he was then conducted to a little room off a long passage, where he was told that he might sleep.

The floor was covered with matting, very old and dirty, and literally alive with ver-

min. However there were other things—suspense, the extreme danger in which he found himself and the uncertainty of the future—that made it impossible for him to sleep.

He waited for two hours or more, until the monastery was silent and the whole building in darkness. And then, he got to his feet, went on tip-toe to the door and opened it, and passed out into the passage-way beyond.

Whether or not he could leave that part of the building without being seen, he had no idea. He knew that he must take the risk. He had, at least, the key of the inner gate, the entrance to the sacred court.

Very stealthily he crept down the passage. On either side of him he could hear men snoring loudly.

He found the door of the monastery open, and entered the courtyard, on the other side of which was the temple where he had made his offering to Buddha.

He had no idea which way to turn. Drawing into the shadow of the wall, lest he should be seen from any of the windows, he tried to get an idea of his surroundings.

The place was like a labyrinth, a perfect maze of buildings, all lying within the great outer walls.

At last, he screwed up his courage and passed round the courtyard until he came to a little archway beyond which he found himself in a smaller court. Here were other buildings, with great brass trumpets at the doors of each—devil-trumpets used by the monks to scare away evil spirits from the sacred precincts beyond.

Then he found himself ascending a long flight of semicircular steps, at the head of which there was a bronze gate. At that hour, in the starlight, the whole place looked very strange and weird—a place of the dead, of an ancient and forgotten world. It was not difficult to believe that ghosts and good and evil spirits walked abroad beneath these gray and crumbling walls.

With difficulty Archer found a key-hole; and taking from his pocket the key which Tong had found in the *yamen* of Chung-li in Peking, he tried it in the lock.

It turned easily and without a sound. And the great gate swung open.

The American passed through, closed the gate and locked it again. He was within the sacred court.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE SACRED COURT

HE FOUND himself in a place which struck him in more ways than one as being extraordinary, even for China. In the starlight he was able to see everything more or less distinctly.

The courtyard in front of him was similar to those through which he had passed, except that there was a pathway down the middle spanned by three archways, that led to a building that was obviously a temple.

Except at the eastern end, where was the gate, this courtyard was surrounded by buildings. These were all joined to one another; and yet, each had a distinct individuality of its own. They differed in character and in architecture, as they had been erected for entirely different purposes.

Of these buildings, there were six in all; three to the right, two to the left, and the temple immediately opposite the gate. Those upon the right, or northern side of the courtyard were lower than those opposite. In one of the buildings upon the left, a light was burning in a window. Otherwise, there was no sign of life in that strange, starlit place.

Having satisfied himself that there was no one about, Archer moved stealthily down the central pathway, availing himself of the shadow afforded by the archways. A nearer view assured him that the small building to his immediate right was a prison of sorts; for the windows were barred with iron.

The next building—the middle one of the three upon the right—was undoubtedly a devil-temple, since there were brass trumpets on either side of the doorway, beyond which Archer could see various hideous idols, fashioned in bronze or carved in wood.

The third or last building on that side was by no means easy to explain. There were but two windows, high up, very large and circular. There was also a peculiar doorway, narrower at the top than at the bottom; though a closer inspection proved that this was but a porch, within which there was a wooden door whereon was written in large Chinese characters in gold the words: "THE SILVER SHOE."

Thus the three buildings on the northern side of the courtyard that lay from east

to west in the following order were: a prison, a devil-temple, and what was, in all probability, a torture-chamber.

Having discovered this, Archer turned and surveyed the two buildings on the other side, which comprised two stories instead of one. There were many windows in each, though beyond this they bore little resemblance to one another; for the most westerly of the two was ornately built and elaborately decorated; whereas the other—which lay to the immediate left of the gateway—might have been a barrack-room or a workhouse.

In order to inspect this latter building, Archer crossed the courtyard; and listening at the windows upon the ground floor, he could hear sounds of snoring.

This supplied him with all the information he wanted. He could have little doubt that here resided the chief lamas, those whom the gatekeeper had described as belonging to the sixth degree; while the more imposing building at the southwestern corner of the precincts—where a light was burning in a window—was undoubtedly the residence of the head priest himself.

The roof of the central temple, or sanctuary, was painted gold; and there was not a stone or brick or tile that was not carved or graven with a design of lotus leaves. Archer found the door wide open, and upon the threshold paused a moment, to decide what he should do. He had learned the lay of the land—as, indeed, the nature and character of these separate buildings and their relation to one another must be remembered to understand what follows.

He realised the probability that in the room where the light was burning, the head priest and Doctor MacKinnon were holding one of their nightly theological discussions. If he could but find a way of climbing to the temple roof, he would be able to look in through the window, and with this object in view, he decided to make an even more careful survey of the whole place.

There were only two buildings of the six which he could enter, the doors of which were open: namely, the two temples—the devil-temple and the sanctuary.

He found the interior of the latter typical of Buddhist temples in the East. There was a golden Buddha, enclosed within brass railings, altars and images without num-

ber, and various carved high-backed chairs for the officiating priests, while the whole place was dimly lighted by bronze lanterns, lined with red oil-paper.

The devil-temple, on the other hand, was a horrible place, furnished with seven-armed demons, deformed and wicked gods, the walls being decorated with swords and knives and all manner of weapons that were alike in nothing, save that they all seemed to have been designed and fashioned with the one idea of inflicting the most ghastly wounds imaginable.

The roof was supported by heavy wooden beams; and Archer was surprised to observe that these extended not only across the devil-temple itself, but into the adjacent torture-house. For the wall on that side did not reach as high as the roof, which covered both buildings without a break. Knowing what he did of Chinese character and superstition, the American rightly judged that this gap in the wall had been made purposely, in order to permit the spirits of the poor wretches who were tortured to escape into the devil-temple, where they would be seized by expectant demons.

HE NOW thought that he had found a way of gaining the roof of the temple. It occurred to him that he could climb without difficulty along the beams from the devil-temple into the torture-house, whence he could reach the roof of the central temple by way of one of the circular windows.

Returning to the courtyard, and inspecting this corner of the place even more carefully than before, he came to the conclusion that this was his only chance. The light still burned in the palace window.

Having made up his mind, he resolved to waste no further time, and had entered the devil-temple when a new idea at once occurred to him. He still had his revolver; but, after the fight at the pagoda he had expended nearly all his ammunition. Availing himself therefore of what fate had thrown in his way, he took down from one of the walls a long, curved knife, the thin blade of which was as sharp as a razor.

With this in his belt, he climbed a stone plinth, upon which stood an image with six eyes in a circle in the middle of his forehead—a hideous, neckless thing.

Ascending to the shoulders of the idol,

Archer found that he could reach one of the central beams. He hoisted himself up, and then, straddle-legged, worked himself rapidly forward, until he had passed the wall and found himself beneath the roof of the adjacent room.

As this place was darker than the devil-temple, it took his eyes some time to grow accustomed to what little light there was. And then he beheld beneath him a gigantic Silver Shoe, above which was a round, glittering thing, a disk of polished steel.

He had no time just then to notice more. His object was to gain the temple roof; and there was no difficulty about this, since one of the transverse beams led directly to the right-hand window—the very one through which he wished to pass. In a few seconds, he had scrambled along the beam, climbed through the window itself, and was crawling on all fours upon the gilded temple tiles.

Upon the other side, under the palace wall, standing upon tip-toe and craning his neck, he was able to look through the lighted window, that he now perceived for the first time to be protected by a grating. It was not that so much which caused his heart to beat violently, as the fact that he beheld and recognized MacKinnon.

The doctor was dressed in the shabby, threadbare clothes of a Buddhist monk; and his head, after the manner of all lamas, was close shaven to the skull.

In the same room was another man, very old and thin, who wore a robe richly embroidered with golden thread that contrasted strangely with the poverty-stricken appearance of his companion. Upon this old man's head was a queer shaped cap, with great ear-flaps, turned upward. And the nails upon the fingers of both his hands were more than three inches long. Here, without doubt, was the head priest himself, of the Temple of the Seven Stars.

Archer could hear every word that was said; for they talked in Mandarin Chinese.

"Ma-ki-yuan," the priest was saying, "I cannot agree with you. Acvaghosha was converted by Parcva. So is it written in the Sacred Books."

"I will not argue," replied the doctor. And with a natural movement of one who is annoyed, he turned impatiently away from the priest—with the result that he faced the window. Here, he almost at once caught a glimpse of Archer's face in the light of

the lamp that burned upon the table.

He gave vent to no exclamation of surprise. There was never the flicker of an eyelash. He turned quietly to the priest, and continued the discussion.

"You confuse the master with the disciple," said he. "However, if you think you are right, you can prove it, if you have a copy of the *Transmission* which the Chinese call the *Fu fa tsang chuan*."

"But I have the book!" cried the priest, somewhat excited. "If you wait a moment, I will fetch it. I will prove my point."

"By all means," said MacKinnon, with a shrug. "I am ever willing to learn."

The head priest had scarce closed the door before MacKinnon was at the window.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, in a quick breathless whisper.

"No. It's Archer, sure enough. Can you get down the stairs and into the courtyard? I've got the key of the gate."

The doctor, looking through the grating, stood stock-still. It was as if he had been turned to stone.

"Look there!" he cried. "What's that?"

He pointed down the courtyard to the great bronze gate at the head of the steps. And through these gates, they could see the flare of a dozen torches.

In the bright light some score of men came forward, ascending the steps swiftly and in silence. And the first of these was Chung-li with three men at his back who dragged forward and buffeted one whose hands were bound behind him, whom Randal Archer recognized as Tong.

"Too late!" the doctor groaned. "Hide, lest you are seen upon the roof!"

And at that, he turned again into the room, at the very moment when the old head priest re-entered.

"Tell me," Archer heard him say, in a voice astonishingly calm, "tell me, my excellent and worthy friend, am I right, or was I wrong. Was it Parcva, or no?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ESCAPE

UPON the golden roof of the sanctuary, Randal Archer crouched in the shadow beneath the eaves of the palace. Here, without himself being seen, he could observe everything that took place in the court below.

His chief danger lay in the fact that he ran the risk of being seen by the head priest who came to the window and looked out to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. But here MacKinnon came to the help of his friend; for he, too, leaned against the grating in the window in such a manner that his broad shoulders blocked his companion's view.

Five persons had by now entered the Sacred Court: Chung-li, three of his men, and the unhappy Tong, a prisoner. Various monks from the outer courtyard had followed the mandarin to the gateway, but had not dared to enter.

Chung-li hailed the head priest at the lighted window.

"Welcome!" he cried. "Do I behold my honored friend, the learned Fong-ning-tuan?"

"My unworthy self," the other answered. "Fong-ning-tuan gives you greeting."

"Not greeting do I want," replied the mandarin, "so much as the key of the torture-room. A slow death for traitors to the Silver Shoe. I have a rascal here to be broken upon the iron cradle with the swinging death above him."

The head priest hesitated.

"What need of this?" he asked.

But, before he could say more, the mandarin had burst forth in a fit of rage.

"I have not journeyed hundreds of *li*," he cried, "to argue with shaven priests! Remember that you rule this place no longer when the president of the Silver Shoe is within the gates. Do as I bid you—or, when I go, I leave you naught to eat but rats."

It was plain to see that the head priest was terrified of the man. Indeed, his hand trembled so violently that the keys he now took from his belt jingled and rattled like castanets. With the greatest difficulty he detached one of these from the bunch, and threw it down into the courtyard below, where Chung-li picked it up.

By then there were lights in many of the windows; and presently, one by one, the senior monks came trooping into the court. These with few exceptions were men advanced in age, with round, stooping shoulders. They appeared to be no less afraid of the mandarin than their superior; for they stood by with folded hands, and allowed Chung-li to do as he wished without question or interference.

The tall mandarin strode hither and thither on the central pathway, shouting in a loud voice, and still addressing himself to the head priest, who wisely preferred to remain at his window at a safe distance from his savage visitor.

"When I bought this place from wall to wall," Chung-li announced, "I purchased also the craven souls of all you lousy, cringing mendicants. I wanted a prison where my captives could eat out their hearts, where those whom I most hated might lie upon the bending iron beneath the swinging death. And therefore did I call the brotherhood the Society of the Silver Shoe."

At that he crossed the court, and bursting into loud laughter, unlocked the door of the torture-room.

"Come!" he cried to those who held the cowering Tong. "Bring that cur-dog here! Bind him down in the Silver Shoe, and set the machinery to work."

His men immediately obeyed him. Both MacKinnon in the room opposite and Archer upon the temple roof saw the interior of the torture-house become suddenly illumined by a torch.

Chung-li himself was absent no longer than a minute; and when he re-appeared, the very sight of the assembled monks seemed to infuriate him more than ever.

"About your business!" he roared. "Back to your holes, you rats!"

At the sight of the sword he carried in his hand the lamas dispersed in such haste that they jostled one another in the doorway of the building from which they had come.

The mandarin watched them, laughing. Then he strode across the courtyard to the head priest's palace, and a little after, appeared in the room where were Fong-ning-tuan and MacKinnon.

"The very man I want!" Archer heard him shout. "This foreign-devil goes next to the Silver Shoe."

Archer could not see them—for they were well within the room—but he could hear every word that followed, when the head priest pleaded earnestly for the life of his friend, the doctor.

"A foreigner though he be," the old man said, "Ma-ki-yuan is no barbarian, but learned in the classic books. Of what crime has he been guilty that he should die in torture?"

AT THAT moment there came a piercing shriek from the torture-room across the way. Tong was already held in the iron grasp of the Silver Shoe.

Chung-li hastened to the window.

"This way!" he shouted to his men below.

The words had scarce left his lips before he was seized by the neck from behind by the great hands of Doctor MacKinnon.

There followed a struggle that Archer could not see. He heard the doctor's heavy breathing as he exerted himself to the utmost, and the mandarin's deep, guttural oaths. They were both strong men; and they fought for life or death with their bare hands, for Chung-li's sword had fallen to the floor. And while they rocked and swayed in a furious embrace the old head priest stood aside, wringing his hands, trembling and not knowing what to do.

At one moment they were on the floor, and at the next they were on their feet again, Chung-li twisting in the doctor's arms with a suppleness of a snake. And yet, strive as he might, he could not get both hands upon MacKinnon's throat.

"Come to my aid!" the mandarin shouted as he fought. "This devil has the strength of no common man!"

Archer had risen to his feet. He dared not shoot through the window, since the two combatants were so close locked in one another's arms. Nor could he enter, by reason of the grating. In a few moments MacKinnon must be overpowered by those who were hastening to Chung-li's help.

He made up his mind in a flash. Desperate straits demanded desperate measures. Though he burnt his boats, he might yet save the doctor.

Crouching low that he might not be seen by those in the court below, he scrambled along the temple roof to the round window of the torture-house. And there, seated straddle-legged upon a beam, he looked down upon a sight in the flaming torchlight that made his blood run cold.

The torch burned in a bronze standard at the heel of the Silver Shoe. That dreadful room was brilliantly illuminated.

And it now appeared that the Silver Shoe itself was an instrument of torture as unique and as ingenious as it was horrible. The victim, whose hands and feet were bound together, was held fast in the shoe by means of a series of a dozen straps with

buckles, that were fastened across him from his ankles to his throat. His head lay in the heel of the shoe; his feet were in the toe.

The sole—or rather the "sock"—of the shoe was made of thin rods of iron, jointed together. This sock was at first quite flat, so that the victim lay straight and stiff, unable to move the fraction of an inch. But when the machinery was set in motion, by means of a massive starting-handle, very slowly, almost imperceptibly, this sock of iron began to bend upward in the middle and downward at the ends, gradually becoming more and more convex.

The result of this is ghastly to consider. The miserable wretch within the shoe slowly suffered his back to be broken. The iron sock moved in little jerks, each time an infinitesimal distance. Slowly the spine was bent backward, till it broke.

As if this were not enough in the way of all that deviltry could devise, above the shoe there swung back and forward, pendulum-like, a sharp and circular knife that gradually descended. The same machinery worked this knife as the iron sock of the shoe; and so wonderfully was the whole instrument fashioned, and so accurate had been the calculations of him who had contrived it, that the knife could inflict no mortal wound upon the victim until the sock had done its work.

Small wonder that the sight of this held Randal Archer inactive for a moment! He could hear the machinery, the driving-chains, the revolving cog-wheels—a sound not unlike the incessant ticking of a monster clock.

And with every second a man in torment was in greater agony and nearer death.

Tong lay with white eyes staring straight above him at that swinging disk of steel. His features were drawn and pinched; his teeth driven into his under-lip, so that there was blood upon his chin.

And then he let out another shriek as the sock beneath him bent again.

It was that loud cry of agony that decided Archer. Never considering for an instant the height he was from the floor, he dropped to the ground, lost his balance and fell, but got to his feet at once, bruised and mad, his breath coming in gasps. A moment after he was at the Silver Shoe itself, unbuckling the straps with hands that trembled as if from shaking palsy.

The loosening of the first of these gave the tortured man almost instantaneous relief. In a few seconds Tong was free.

He could not speak. He was still bleeding from the lips. His eyes were filled with terror.

ARCHER went to the doorway and looked out. There was still many people in the courtyard. A glance was enough to assure him that he had not been seen; no one knew of his presence there. No one but MacKinnon even knew that there was any stranger at large within the sacred court.

He went back to Tong, and gripped the man by an arm.

"Do as I tell you," he whispered. "Follow me."

They passed through the door, and crept along in the shadow of the wall, until they reached the entrance of the devil-temple.

There, Randal Archer placed his lips to the mouthpiece of one of the great devil-trumpets that was balanced upon a swivel; and this he blew with all the breath in his lungs, while at the same time he beat violently upon a devil-drum.

Tong, as he had been told to do, followed his example; so that the noise was like the uproar of the nether regions, the turmoil of the pits of Hades.

For three minutes, at the very least, this pandemonium endured. Then, in the ensuing silence, Archer and Tong crept to the doorway and looked out upon the courtyard.

The American had relied on something in the nature of a panic, and one look was enough to assure him that he had not been wrong. For many of the priests had fled in terror to their quarters; while others were hiding beneath the archways, crowded together like silly sheep in a storm. They were ready to believe that all the devils and the evil spirits of the underworld were loosed and leagued against them—when one of Chung-li's men, who had entered the torture-room, came running out, shouting that the prisoner had escaped, a miracle had happened, and the Silver Shoe was empty.

MacKinnon was now in the center of the courtyard, his hands bound together. Chung-li had ascended the steps of the sanctuary; and there, waving his arms about him like a madman, he declared that

he cared nothing for god, man or devil; and in the midst of this oration Randal Archer shot him dead. The bullet struck him in the forehead, and he pitched forward, to roll down the steps, at the foot of which his great body lay all crumpled up, in his blood-splashed mandarin's robe.

Tong rushed towards MacKinnon, and with a sword that he had taken from the devil-temple, cut the doctor's bonds.

In a trice the three of them had reached the gate. Archer already had the key in his hand; and this he thrust into the lock in the nick of time, as Chung-li's men grasped the meaning of what had happened.

The American was in danger of being stabbed through the framework of the gate when he locked it from the outer side.

"That will delay them more than a minute," said he. "We have to remember that there's but one gun between the three of us. To the main gateway, as fast as we can run!"

They crossed the outer courtyards, where the lamas who had come from the monastery offered them no resistance. These men know nothing of what had happened in the inner court, save that they had heard the blast of the devil-trumpets and the beating of the devil-drums; and they were ignorant and superstitious enough to believe that these three flying figures were demons who had escaped from out of the devil-pots in which their souls resided.

They drew back alarmed, and allowed the fugitives to reach the outer gate, where the old janitor dived like a startled rabbit into his lodge and slammed the door.

Knowing already where the key was kept, Archer opened the gate without waste of time, and a moment after, they found themselves beneath the stars upon the hill-top, with the fresh air in their nostrils and their hearts beating violently.

WITHOUT halt they fled throughout the night. They experienced no difficulty in finding their way, since they knew they had but to follow the course of the Yellow River.

They passed the Water Tower the following afternoon, and some days later, arrived at the village of Wu Shen Chuang, near which place they had been ambushed by Chung-li.

A little lower down the river, they picked

up Somers and the other men who had been searching for their leader in the neighborhood for days. Archer decided to march back to Pauteh, where they hoped to make an arrangement with the local prefect, whereby they could regain possession of their ponies and pack-mules. For they were in something of a dilemma; they had lost their money-chest, and all the money between them was not enough to take them back to Pekin.

However, the prefect proved obliging enough; for, as good luck had it, he had frequently visited Pekin and had met Doctor MacKinnon before.

Thereupon began their return journey to the capital; and at their first bivouac, there took place an incident that they could not at first regard as anything but a miracle. For who should walk into their camp when the camp-fire was alight, and they were sharing the little tobacco that they had, but Sir John Raikes himself, with his eyeglass in his eye.

"An unexpected pleasure!" he exclaimed. "To tell you the truth I'd given you up for dead men, until I heard of you by chance two days ago."

Archer burst into laughter.

"That we're here at all," said he, "is wonderful enough. But you! We would never have thought of leaving the district, had we dreamed you were still alive."

Raikes explained how the sampan had turned turtle half-way down the gorge. He declared that, though he was not a particularly strong swimmer, he had been washed ashore at a sharp bend, thrown by

the waves high and dry upon a rock. Battered and bruised, he had found his way to the hut of a peasant, who had treated him with the utmost kindness. There, failing to hear any news of his comrades, and knowing that he was worse than helpless alone, he had decided to endeavor to make his own way back to Pekin, though he had but a vague notion of the route and could speak not a word of the language, beyond a few sentences he had picked up on the line-of-march.

He was delighted with his experiences. He gathered that he had been taken everywhere for an inhabitant of a distant province who could not speak the local dialect. In consequence he had met with nothing but kindness and hospitality, though he was unarmed and had very little money with which to pay for his food.

"But I've missed all the fun!" he complained, when he heard what had happened to the others. "I'd have given a year's pay to have seen that Silver Shoe. The jolly, old god of luck was with you with a vengeance!"

"And there's one mystery the less in China," said MacKinnon. "I'm never likely to forget what you two fellows have done for me. And I've found a new friend in Fong-ning-tuan, who promises to come and see me if he ever journeys to Pekin. He and his monks were terrorized by Chung-li. He is a good old fellow at heart, who wouldn't hurt a fly—though his religion, with his devil-gods and trumpets and drums, bears no resemblance to the gospel the Buddha preached."

THE END



Everybody's **Meeting PLACE**

*Where writers, readers and the editor gather
for informal discussion*

OCTOBER THOUGHTS IN JULY WEATHER

WELL, here we are with the October issue and, outside my window as I write this, little waves of heat go rolling dizzily over the Hudson River. It's still July. To be exact it's July 21st and the weather in New York for the past week hasn't been at all pleasant. It's been more than hot. It's been steaming.

Further, a window in my apartment wouldn't open. I banged, hammered, pushed and pulled. Eventually, my hand went through the glass and was fairly well cut up. So if you find my style a bit cramped you'll know the reason why.

Anyway, let's look at the October issue.

THE NEW SERIAL

YOU'LL find that I've announced *The Desert Moon Mystery* on the cover, that I've blurb'd about it on the two pages on which it starts, and here again I want to say something about it. All this indicates that I think pretty well of it, doesn't it? I do. I think it's swell! It has mystery. It has excitement. It

has characterization. These people in *The Desert Moon Mystery* seem real people to me. The old housekeeper who tells the story especially so. Notice how she flavors the narrative with similes and metaphors that come directly from her own experience as cook and housekeeper.

This story had me absolutely baffled. I had no idea of the solution of the mystery until the author chose to reveal it. In turn, I suspected first this character, then that one. That's exactly what I think you'll do.

PRIZES FOR GOOD GUESSERS

IN FACT I'll make a little one-sided bet with you. To the first reader of **EVERYBODY'S** who sends me in a correct solution of the mystery, before, of course, the final instalment appears in the February issue, I'll send a copy of the O. Henry collection of the *The Best Stories of 1926*. I've selected the book because it happens to contain a story of mine and that adds a personal touch to the bet. But it contains fourteen other stories better than mine—altogether a very interesting and worth while book to have.

No, I'll make a better offer than that! I'll send a copy of the book to the first five readers who send in a correct solution, before the final instalment appears.

This is just a slight sporting proposition between you, the readers, and me, the editor. I haven't told the publishers of *EVERYBODY'S* anything about it.

THE AUTHOR OF THE MYSTERY

AS USUAL, when a new author is to appear in the new *EVERYBODY'S*, I've written the author of *The Desert Moon Mystery* and asked her to tell me something about herself. Mrs. Strahan's reply is meager and modest. But I like it, don't you?

When I used to write short stories, editors once in a while, asked me to furnish material about myself for their magazines. And, with all my might and main, I tried to send them full and satisfactory replies. And not one of them ever used one word I sent. So, I have been lead to suppose that with regard to autobiographical material, I'm a complete failure.

Their requests, to know something about the writer of a nice little story for a woman's magazine, were simple compared to this. The trouble is, that if you were to attempt to give any of my personality to your readers it would spoil the whole show.

I am a married woman, not too old, who lives in a meek little house on a hill in Portland, Oregon. Jane Austen is my novelist; Browning and Emily Dickinson are my poets. My favorite recreation is trout fishing, for big ones. Next to that, swimming in very shallow water, for I'm a natural coward.

I wrote *The Desert Moon Mystery* because I thought there was, just now, a better market for mystery stuff than for anything else, and I needed the money.

My husband's business took us to Nevada for ten days and we lived for six months, in a tent, in the place where I put the Desert Moon Ranch in the story. I liked it better than any other living I have ever done.

Or is this what you want? Born in Oregon. Father and mother born in Oregon. Grandparents, on both sides, came across the plains in the earliest days.

I don't mean to be perverse. I'll eagerly answer any questions you care to send to me. I am wondering whether, possibly, your offer to scream about me might have been made from kindness, or a sense of duty, or something of that sort? I do want to have the story well advertised; but, beyond using my name for it, I don't care at all about personal advertising. I'd just as soon have your readers think that Key Clever Strahan was a cowboy, or an ex-detective, or any other suitable person. I am quite sure it would be wiser to use the entire scream for the story. I'd like that, too.

I feel very proud over the fact that the story did mystify you. I am grateful to you for telling me that it did, too. I hope this letter doesn't seem to disprove my gratitude. Again, I'll be glad to answer any direct questions you send to me.

THE THREE TALES

NEXT I want to prattle about *The Three Tales from the Life of the Old West* with which I begin this October *EVERYBODY'S*. Some rather interesting editorial correspondence preceded their publication.

After Mr. SPEARS had sent them in and I had read them I wrote him in a bewildered way:

Are these supposed to be incidents that really happened in the old days of the West? Or are they fictitious?

Perhaps I could publish three of them all at one time under the general heading of "Three Accounts of Actual Happenings in the West of Long Ago," with your titles as sub-titles. But I don't know whether they are actual or not.

And you'll probably think this letter most ingenious but, frankly, those sketches of yours puzzled me because they're so unusual. Not, of course, that that's against them. On the contrary.

To this Mr. Spears replied:

All those "minor hold up" stories are based on actualities. The *Bag of Gold Coins* actually happened. Bandits also did twist the ends of a man's thumbs with latigos and a revolver barrel for a bar. Cowboys have held up victims to get money for girls, time out of mind. Preceptors have been euchred out of their big minds by conscienceless scoundrels—even Crest of the Holy Moses committed suicide because a man ran away with his wife. Cowboys have committed crimes and been caught by saddle details. And shy, diffident men have come forward to meet unflinchingly hold up and other crises.

I could probably find authority for every statement of fact or action throughout the series. But I have changed names, and united data, and changed or mingled colors hoping to meet the "plot" demands.

I am familiar with your dilemma. Editors have more than once asked me to assure them that my stories, which they wanted to buy, weren't actual histories or news—fearing perhaps I was confessing somebody else's sins. And stories of mine have been printed with editorial assurances that they are fiction, despite verisimilitude. And a story of mine last autumn in *Adventures* is now being used by an old timer to check on his own fact stories about wolves, because a story is real wolf-pack nature, though fictitious (*The Wolf Pack*, Nov. 8th issue).

I seek verisimilitude. Twenty years ago I wrote a pearl story, and the foremost freshwater pearl buyer of the United States wrote to me my story was the first pearl story he had

ever read in which a diamond, emerald, ruby or other stone could not have been substituted for the gem in my yarn.

The fact is, I write my fiction for experts. I think that everyone of those minor hold up stories I sent you would be recognized in part by people who know the real West—the kind who laugh at the absurdities of mere romanticists who “imagine” things.

Definitely, I seek to tell a reader who is interested in Western stories something novel, something interesting, something true. When I wrote *The Wolf Pack* I changed every geographical name, gave it as detached a nomenclature as Utopia itself. And a Utah man, when he read it said: “Why I know that country! I’ve clipped sheep there. Sure I have!”

I don’t lie to my readers under guise of fiction. My success is not so great that I am an attractive or worth while example on that score. And I don’t think absence or other qualities in any story of mine should be excused because of my fact-meticulousness (if that’s a proper phrase) but I do wish that when my stories ring so true that an editor is baffled by their sincerity and utter verisimilitude, he would judge them by their interest alone and give me at least a chance as you have done to assure him that I am writing fiction.

Sometimes I wish I could fake. What’s the use of being truthful and within the bounds of reason when readers want to be fooled, to dream in impossible terms? I feed the imagination with realities. When my fiction stirs the fancy of a reader to live likewise, I can send him to that terrain to do likewise with my heroes. I suppose more than one hundred outfits have gone down the Mississippi seeking shanty-boat adventures after reading my River fiction. And they found exactly the equivalent of what I told, even to furs and river rats and the very people I told about. A sheller and pearler even recognized the pearl business I told about, just as the Maiden Lane expert did. Things like this make me persist in realism, honest and exact.

I have an idea that Mr. Spears knows the West both old and new as thoroughly as any man now living. In fact, I am trying to induce him to conduct a department in EVERYBODY’S about the West—a department, pithy and informal, in which he’d tell us facts, historical and legendary, anecdotes, anything he had in mind. And also answer questions from readers about the West—questions ranging from those who want to locate there to those who merely wish to go on a hunting or fishing trip or sightseeing there.

How would you like to see such a department in the magazine?

OLD FRIENDS

ASIDE from these two features you’ll find mostly old friends represented in this issue. I’m getting a little tired repeating about **ALFRED WHITE’S** war stories each month the same phrase, “This is the best war story White has written” but somehow each month that is exactly how I feel. This one, *The Loyal Grenadier*, is more serious in tone than most of his stories. To me, it reads like a chapter cut from the history of the Great War.

Another old friend is **CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS** with his novelette, *Disinherited*. I may be getting a little fat-headed about our authors but in Sanders’ case too, I seem to feel a constant improvement.

The other novelette *Sea Birds* is by **MILLARD WARD** who has also appeared before in EVERYBODY’S and will, I know, appear again.

A NOVEL BY HUGH PENDEXTER

THE most important news of next month is that EVERYBODY’S will start another new serial, *The Roaring Towns*, by **HUGH PENDEXTER**. It is a story of the dance halls, the saloons, the men bad and good of the old days in Cheyenne, when Cheyenne was one of the wildest of the frontier towns. As everybody who reads Pendexter’s work knows, the story is authentic in its reflection of those whirling, rushing years, perhaps the most colorful, the most exciting, in America’s history.

And as I have the November issue planned now there’ll be more stories from **CAPTAIN DINGLE**, **RAYMOND S. SPEARS**, **THOMAS THURSDAY** and others.

Meanwhile start guessing about the murderer in *The Desert Moon Mystery* so that you can win one of those books autographed by

O.G.



Beginning
The
Roaring Towns

By HUGH PENDEXTER

A story of the dance halls, the saloons, the men, good and bad, of the Old West when Cheyenne was on the frontier and the wildest of the roaring towns. Written with Hugh Pendexter's accurate reflection of those spirited and colorful days.

Three More Tales of the Old West

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Fiction that reads like fact.

And Short Stories and a Novelette

by Charles Wesley Sanders, Pollok Guiler, Captain Dingle, A. A. Caffrey,
Thomson Burtis, Walter W. Liggett and Thomas Thursday.